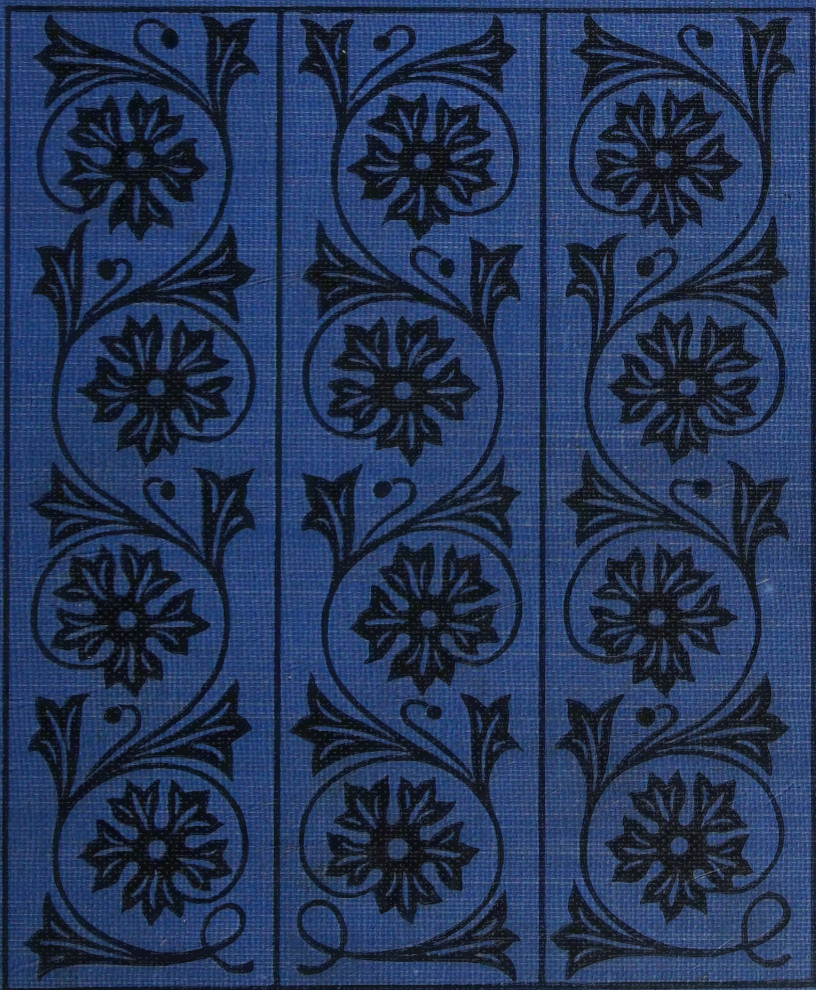
FLOSS SILVERTHORN



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"Now for a spread. Where shall we lay the cloth?"—*Frontispiece.*

Floss Silverthorn;

OR,

THE MASTER'S LITTLE HANDMAID.

BY

AGNES GIBERNE

AUTHOR OF
"THE EARLS OF THE VILLAGE"; "WILL FOSTER OF THE FERRY"
"LIFE TANGLES"; "IDA'S SECRET";
ETC., ETC.

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BRITISH MANUFACTURE

FLOSS SILVERTHORN.

CHAPTER I.

WAITING FOR HUGH.

"I WISH grown-up people would never look dull," sighed Flossie Silverthorn.

There was a large fire burning in the study, for it was just about the middle of February. A ponderous old easy-chair had been pulled out into the full light of the dancing flames, and a child lay curled up cosily in its centre, with her head pillowed upon one of the arms. At her back stood Hugh Silverthorn's writing table, with books and papers outspread, and a china doll in a pink frock lying upon a pile of letters. A small dark-skinned lassie of about twelve years old was Hugh Silverthorn's little half-sister, and her brown eyes gazed steadily into the layers of red coal, with a pensive and even pitiful expression.

"It isn't as if Hugh had anything to make him

unhappy. If he had lessons like me, now, to learn for Miss Brice,—lessons that won't come right, do what I can,—he might have some reason for it. Nurse talks about his being 'worried,' but I don't see what in the world there is to worry Hugh. She worries me often enough, I know, but that doesn't make me look dull,—at least, not for more than a minute. And Hugh never has to mend his gloves, or make button-holes, or go to bed early. He can always do just exactly whatever he wants, —except, of course, if he wanted to do wrong. But then, Hugh never does want to do anything wrong."

Flossie twisted herself round, and put her head down upon the other arm, and looked meditatively up at the ceiling.

"How funny it is to see the shadows getting longer and shorter every minute! I wonder why they do. Hugh will tell me, if I ask him. How nice it is to have a brother like Hugh! Most little girls haven't anything of the sort. Of course there are a great many brothers in the world, but none of them are like Hugh; I am quite sure of that. I do pity all the little girls who haven't Hugh for their brother. But then they never had him, so they don't know what it is, and they can't miss it as *I* should do.

"Ten minutes to five. Hugh will be in soon, and then we shall have our nice talk before tea.

That's the very best part of the whole day. I wonder why it is that happy things always last such a little bit of a time.

"Well, I know what I am going to talk about to-day. I shall ask him what the meaning of 'handmaid' is. Hugh will tell me. Of course I know it means a servant, but I want to know more. I'm not a servant, and I don't wish to be one, and yet I liked Hugh the other day to say, 'That's my useful little handmaid.' And then—what the other gentleman said——

"That's what has made me think so much about it. I wish ever so much that I could be quite sure *I* am 'the Master's little Handmaid.' It does sound so beautiful. 'The Lord Jesus Christ's little Handmaid.' I'd like to be that, ever so much. But I don't know whether I am. I know He loves me, and I think I love Him a little, but I can't tell whether I am His little Handmaid.

"So I'll ask Hugh. I couldn't ask anybody else, but I can him. Hugh is always so good. I shall tell him it is a grave question. And then perhaps he will tell me why *he* is always so grave now, and why he doesn't play with me as he used, and why Nurse was crying over her mending yesterday evening, when she thought I was asleep.

"To be sure she says her little nephew Jimmy is ill, but I don't fancy that is the reason. She loves me more than Jimmy,—dear old Nurse! And she

kept looking across at me, as if she was thinking about nobody else.

"I wonder——" Flossie suddenly raised herself to a sitting posture, and fixed her eyes upon the curtained window; "I wonder,—I wonder if—no, it can't be that anything is the matter with *me*. Because I am quite well and strong and hungry. It can't be that, can it?"

Nevertheless, Flossie stood upright in the arm-chair, and looked across somewhat anxiously into the mirror over the fireplace.

"Nurse was taking in a frock of mine yesterday, because she said it was too big for me. So I must have grown thinner. And this morning Hugh told me I mustn't be so pale. I'm not pale now,—there's quite red in my cheeks. But that poor little girl who died of consumption last year used to be pale in the morning and red in the evening. And she had a cough, and I have had a cough too lately." Flossie gave an involuntary scrape as she spoke. And then she slipped suddenly down into the middle of the chair again, and heaved a great sigh.

"Poor Hugh! Darling Hugh! If it is that—if it should be that—I don't know what he would do without me. He loves me so much,—almost more, I think, than I love him, though I don't know whether that can be, because I love him with the whole of my heart. But then, Hugh's heart is bigger than mine.

"After all, I don't think it can be that which makes Hugh grave, because he doesn't have the doctor to see me, and I don't take any medicines Only I can't think what else in the world it can be.

"There he comes! Oh, there's Hugh."

Flossie sprang up with a bound, and rushed to the door. A tall large-made man stood there in the dim light, and he folded his arms tightly round her, when she flung herself into them. But he did not say a word.

"Hugh, you're home a little bit early to-night. Hugh, are you tired?"

Flossie grew suddenly grave and quiet herself. She took his hand and pulled him into the room, and made him sit down in the easy-chair, and then looked at him soberly for a few seconds, till a low deep sigh broke from him. Flossie could not stand that.

"Hugh, I wish you wouldn't. I do wish you wouldn't. Please don't."

"I will not. Come and sit here, Floss."

Flossie obeyed so far as to squeeze herself into her accustomed corner by his side, but she twisted round so that she might continue her scrutiny of his face.

"What's the matter, Hugh?" she asked timidly, at length, after anxiously studying the compressed lips and sorrowful eyes which had often troubled her little heart of late,—though never quite *so* com-

pressed or quite *so* sorrowful as on this evening. "Hugh, what's the matter?" she repeated fearfully, for he made no answer.

"Never mind just now," he said huskily. "I am —rather worried, darling. Let us have our twilight chat."

Flossie put her head down upon his shoulder. Somehow the zest of the thing was gone.

"What is it to be about this evening, Floss?"

"I did mean to ask you a question, but I can't now,—I can't till I know what it is that makes you unhappy. I couldn't, Hugh, so please don't say I must. Oh! it isn't—it isn't that you are ill!" exclaimed Flossie, starting up in sudden terror.

"I ill! Why, Flossie, what can have put such a notion into your little head? No, indeed,—I am well enough. Come now, tell me what you have been doing the last half-hour."

"I have been waiting here for you. Why, you know I always do, Hugh,—always! I just look forward and count the hours till five o'clock. It's the dearest, best, sweetest bit of the whole day to me, because you let me do and say just exactly what I like, and you and I are always quite alone together. Do you know, Hugh, when you were away last winter for a whole week, the dreadful part of the day was between five and six o'clock? The rest of the time I could be pretty busy, and

manage somehow to get along. But at five o'clock I always came, and got into your chair, and cried till tea-time."

"I don't think that was a wise plan, Flossie," said Hugh, in a voice which he vainly tried to make cheerful.

"Ah, but I couldn't help it. I should do just the same now. Hugh, there's nobody in all the world that I love like you,—nobody!" said Flossie, with an emphatic squeeze of his hand.

"But you love other people too."

"Yes, a little bit. I love darling old Nursie next to you,—if *only* she wouldn't give me so many button-holes to make," added Flossie. "And I love Miss Brice too—of course—at least, I think so,—yes, I am almost sure. But then it's a different love from the way I love *you*. It isn't like the same thing at all. One seems to come from the very inside of my heart, and the other is more like the outside."

Another sigh answered her. "Hugh, don't!" said Flossie desperately. "You don't know how dreadful it is when you do that. You said you wouldn't."

"And you love your friends about here," said Hugh.

"Yes, of course I do,—some of them," said Flossie; "if they admire you, I love them. And Willa is my own friend, so I love her most I suppose, only I think I love Mrs. Knight more

Hugh, what makes you ask such funny questions?"

Hugh suddenly sat more upright, and took her two hands into both his, and looked steadily into her face.

"Because I am a coward, my little Flossie. Because I have something to tell you, which I don't know *how* to tell you, and so I am beating about the bush, not daring to come to the point. Flossie, you have always been my little friend, as well as my little sister. And friends help one another in trouble. And I am in great trouble to-day. Will you be brave, and help me to bear it, darling?"

"If you'll tell me what it is," said Flossie calmly.

"Do you remember when we first came to this house, Floss?"

"Just a little," said Flossie. "It's six years ago, and I was only six then. But I haven't forgotten."

"And you know it has been my house all along, —my house and my garden?"

"Yes, your very own," said Flossie.

"I *thought* they were. When old Aunt Forrester died, a will of hers was found, leaving everything to me. You know, when people die, they often write beforehand what is called a *will*, saying whom their things are to belong to."

"Yes, I know that, and I remember Aunt Forrester. She used to give me sugar-plums."

"Flossie," said Hugh slowly, "I have thought all along that this house was fairly and rightfully mine. But——"

"And isn't it?" asked Flossie, with a little gasp, and a face of alarm.

"No. I can't explain to you exactly how, for you would not understand. But something was wrong about the will. It was a long time before anybody thought of such a thing, and still longer before it was all settled. It is settled now, and the house is not mine: I must give it up to its owner."

Flossie's face wore a look of dismay. "Then can't you and I live here any longer?"

"No. Everything here belongs to Colonel Marshall."

"Colonel Marshall," said Flossie. "Willa's uncle out in India! You don't mean him?"

"Yes, dearest. But he is not in India now. He has just reached England, and he will come to live here with his children."

"And his wife," added Flossie, in a sort of absent half-interested way. "Willa—oh, I think she will be pleased to have her cousins near. I hope Chenda Marshall won't make Willa forget me. Don't you think she will be my friend still? O Hugh! O Hugh! it will be so hard to go away"

Hugh held his hand up to his face for a moment. He had not uttered the worst yet.

"It will be so hard," repeated Flossie sorrowfully; "I love everything here so much. Hugh, shall we have to leave everything behind us? Won't Colonel Marshall let us take away our own books, and my pussy, and Prince and Fido?"

"Your own little treasures are your own still. But Prince and Fido will belong to Colonel Marshall. Flossie, I must tell you the truth. I have no longer one shilling in the world that I can call my own."

Flossie looked very thoughtful. Her trust in her brother was too perfect to admit of actual anxiety on her part, but still she was a little troubled. "Not a shilling! I think I have ten shillings, Hugh. But then we couldn't live on that long, could we? And it would not be at all nice to have to beg. O Hugh! I hope we shan't ever have to do that."

"No, indeed, my darling. God will provide for us."

Flossie looked more satisfied.

"But He may provide in a way which seems hard to bear," went on Hugh in a low tone. "Flossie, do you know Colonel and Mrs. Marshall have been very kind——"

"I don't think it's at all kind to turn us out of our house," said Flossie, with a swelling in her

throat. "O Hugh, I wish—I wish they would let us stay."

"*I* could not stay, Flossie. It is not my house any longer. I could not live idly here, and let them support me. I must go away, and work hard, and make another home for my Floss!"

"Where shall we go?" asked Flossie, looking up into his eyes. "Hugh, I don't think you need feel miserable. It won't be so very dreadful, after all. I do love the place, but you know that's only the outside sort of love, like the way I love Miss Brice. It isn't inside my heart as you are. I'll just be your little handmaid more than ever, and work so hard, and make you comfortable. And I'll mend all your clothes, and not mind how many button-holes I have to do. So don't mind, Hugh. I'll be very brave, and not mind anything, because you know I always have you, and that's better than the whole world put together."

"O Flossie, don't! Oh, if it could be!" and Hugh covered his face with his hands.

Flossie gazed at him in utter bewilderment at first. But slowly there dawned upon her mind the truth that something lay beyond,—something more terrible than had yet been told her.

"Hugh, please, I don't know what you mean," she said in a low distinct tone. "I want to know, please. Where is it that we shall have to go?"

"*I* am going to China. Colonel Marshall has

found me something to do which will take me out there."

She could hardly catch the faintly uttered words. "China! away in Asia! It is a very long way. But we won't mind it, Hugh darling."

"*I* am going. Flossie, it won't do for you. English children can't live in that place. Flossie,—my poor little darling!"

His own voice quite broke down, but he looked up to see how she took it. Ah, she understood now the force of the blow which had fallen. No tears came to her eyes, but they grew dim and fixed, and every trace of colour faded out of her cheeks and lips. She did not protest or complain, or ask any more particulars. The brown head was laid quietly on Hugh's shoulder, and his arms were folded tightly round her. And an hour passed away, and still they sat thus, and neither of them had spoken.

CHAPTER II.

IN THE ARM-CHAIR STILL.

"FLOSSIE, my pet, don't you want some tea? It is getting late."

Hugh's voice broke the stillness suddenly. The fire had sunk low, and the long shadows about the room had grown hazy and dim. Hugh could only just see the outline of the little figure which lay upon him, but he knew by the convulsive clasp of the arms, and a shuddering sigh from time to time, that Flossie was neither asleep nor unconscious.

No answer, except a tighter clinging; but after a minute he spoke again: "My darling, this won't do. Come, Flossie, I think a cup of tea will do us both good. I don't want to see white cheeks on the morrow. And *I* am very tired, and have eaten nothing since nine this morning."

The last appeal took effect,—a very unselfish one, for Hugh had never in his life felt less like eating than at this moment. She stood up slowly, and pushed the hair off her face, while Hugh leant

forward to take the poker, and coax the dull red coals into a bright blaze. Very sorrowful eyes were they which reflected its light, both in brother and sister. And Flossie turned suddenly to look him in the face, and then flung herself down upon him again, pressing her face into his shoulder in such an agony of silent woe, that the strong calm man could have wept aloud for pitying sympathy and bitter heart-ache. But neither he nor she dared utter another word with reference to their trouble. He knew she would not. He himself positively *could* not.

"Flossie, won't you ring the bell for me? We will have tea quietly in here to-night. I should like a cup, darling,"—for she did not move, and he was anxious to turn her thoughts, if possible, in some other direction. "I have such a headache, Flossie."

She raised herself instantly, and rang the bell as he desired, coming back again to his side. "I am so sorry. I wish—I wish you hadn't," she said hurriedly, with her quivering white lips. "Ill get—I'll call—Nurse—at least——"

He would have checked the confused utterances, by drawing her down again in his arms, doubting, after all, whether it might not be wiser *not* to rouse her as yet. But she resisted him, and stepped back.

"Please, no; I won't tire you any more, Hugh; please — I'll only make your tea — only don't

have a headache, please, because I can't bear to see you ill,—not well, I mean."

And then there was a knock at the door, and Flossie herself gave the order for the bringing of the tea-tray. She did not remain by Hugh's side, but went to the table, and made a clear space there, with quick nervous movements of her poor little icy hands. Hugh sat shading his eyes from the fire-light, and silently watching her from beneath his fingers. He had not looked for this self-command; but natural childlike grief would have been less hard to see.

The tray was brought in, with the tea already made, and she poured it out carefully, only betraying her trembling by the sharp ring of the milk-jug against the sugar-basin. She brought Hugh's cup to him, and sipped her own once or twice; but eating was an impossibility for either of them, though they made believe at it.

"One cup more, Flossie."

"It's doing your head good, isn't it, Hugh?"

"I don't see how it could fail to do so, given me by such a dear attentive little handmaid."

The word slipped from him without thought, but Flossie's face quivered all over. She brought him the cup, and watched him take it, but he rose and put it down himself on the table. And then, when he returned to his seat, he took her back into his arms, and the brown head went down again on his

shoulder. Neither his resolution nor hers was equal to much more of effort.

"Won't you be tired, Hugh?" she murmured.

"Never tired of holding you, Flossie. My darling, I only made you move because it was good for you."

"Oh, I know;" and she sighed.

Another half-hour of heavy weary silence. Hugh was making up his mind to approach the sad subject again. Brooding in secret would be worse for Flossie than speaking openly. Yet he doubted if he could bring her to it; and while he was debating with himself, Flossie's voice broke the stillness—

"Hugh, I wish you would tell me what a 'handmaid' is."

Perhaps he had never in his life been more surprised at a brief remark, or more thankful for it.

"A servant, dear,—one who waits. Don't you know that?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"What made you ask, darling?"

"Only what that gentleman said—don't you remember?"

"No, I am very stupid, Flossie; you must tell me."

"The other day," said Flossie, in the same patient repressed tone. "That gentleman who took tea here. And you called me your little handmaid, and he said something about it, and

I said you often called me so, and I loved it, and always would——"

Flossie shivered, and broke off.

"Yes, I remember," said Hugh, marvelling that she should have chosen to speak of this just then. "And he said, '*I* should love to see Flossie Silverthorn the Master's little handmaid,—the little handmaid of our Lord Jesus Christ.'"

"He didn't know whether I was or not, did he, Hugh?"

"No, darling, he could not tell. He only meant that if you were not, he wished you were."

"But—do you think I am?" asked Flossie, in a very low voice.

"I think my Flossie loves Him."

"I think I do a little—sometimes," said Flossie. "But am I His little handmaid? Hugh, please tell me."

"Suppose we find out first what a handmaid is," said Hugh gently. "Do you know, Flossie, I fancy a good many people may have learnt to love the Lord Jesus, and to trust Him to take them to heaven safely, and still they may not have learnt yet to be His handmaids."

A little squeeze of his hand encouraged Hugh to go on.

"You see, to be a handmaid means a good deal. A handmaid is in her mistress' service. She can't do as she likes, or go out or come in without her

mistress' leave. She has to be always serving her mistress, and doing her work. If she is a faithful handmaid, she will do it very diligently, and never murmur at what she has to do. She will never want to go away and serve other mistresses."

Hugh put back his hand, and took up a book that was lying on the table behind them. "Here is a little dictionary, Flossie, and I will tell you what it says about the word. A handmaid or handmaiden is 'a maid that waits at hand.' So she must be much in the presence of her mistress, and always be obeying commands spoken by her mistress' own lips. Flossie, when we talk about being a handmaid of the Lord Jesus, we only have to put *Him* in the mistress' place, and——"

Hugh did not finish his sentence, and it was some seconds before Flossie said, "I'm not like that."

"Dear little Flossie, there is great happiness in it. Better far be *His* little handmaid, than anything else,—than mine."

Flossie sobbed sharply once, but no more. Hugh kissed her forehead as she clung to him, and then softly repeated to her,—"Unto Thee lift I up mine eyes, O Thou that dwellest in the heavens. Behold, as the eyes of servants look unto the hand of their masters, and as the eyes of a maiden unto the hand of her mistress; so our eyes wait

upon the Lord our God until that He have mercy upon us.'"

"I think I'll learn that," whispered Flossie.

"A little 'maid that waits at hand.' 'Our eyes *wait* upon the Lord our God.' Keep hold of those two thoughts, darling. There is great beauty in them."

"But *I* can't wait at hand upon *Him*," said Flossie.

"Why not, dear? He is always near. Flossie, you can't be a faithful little handmaid, unless you keep always looking up to the Lord Jesus, watching for His command or His smile, and doing just what He tells you."

"What does He tell?"

"A great many different things. Sometimes He will give you a little piece of work to do for Him. Sometimes He will send you off on an errand, to carry a message to somebody who wants comforting. Sometimes He will give you a long wearisome seam, which seems to you of no use at all, and tell you to sit still until it is done. Sometimes He will call you to come and take a seat at His feet, and look up in His face and hear what He has to say. Sometimes He will bring you a cup of bitter medicine, and tell you to drink it; for the Master looks after His little handmaidens' health, or they would not be strong enough to do His bidding."

Flossie's heavy sigh showed that she knew now

what such a cup meant, as she might not have known three hours earlier.

"But I don't know how I am to know what He does tell me to do."

"Ah, darling, *that* you won't know, unless you read His Word a great deal, to learn what His commands are, and always keep very close to Him, looking out for what He wants you to do. He gives His orders quite low, quite softly; and if His little handmaids grow careless, and keep at some distance away from Him, they don't hear what He says. You must be always *at hand*."

"I couldn't, Hugh—how could I?"

"Only by letting Him keep you there. Tell Him that you want to be His handmaid, and that you give yourself up to Him, and then ask Him to make you just such a little handmaid as He would like to have you, and to use you to do things which He wants done. Only, Flossie dearest, you must be ready now and then to take a cup—hard to drink—if He hands it to you."

"O Hugh! O Hugh! I *can't* live without you," cried Flossie, in stifled passionate sorrow.

How bitterly his own heart was uttering the same words with respect to her, Hugh alone knew. He stroked her hair, and soothed her by mute caresses, but could not speak cheeringly, as he would fain have done. And presently there came a tap at the door, and Nurse's voice said —

"Miss Flossie's bed-time, please sir."

"Must I go?" she whispered.

"Better, my darling. You want a night's rest. Only—ask any questions first, if you like."

Flossie shook her head, and her face worked painfully. One moment more she clung to him, and then started up and left the room. But not with Nurse, any more than with Hugh, could she enter that night upon the subject of her grief.

CHAPTER III.

WILHELMINA KNIGHT.

IT was a very pale and grave little girl that walked into the breakfast-room next morning. As a rule, Flossie was always the first downstairs, but she had lain long awake the night before, and Nurse had roused her somewhat late in consequence. So Hugh was there already when she entered.

"Good-morning, Floss dear."

Flossie stood leaning against him for a moment, with his arm round her.

"I'm sorry I am not in time, Hugh. Shall I ring for prayers?"

Hugh rose and did it himself, by way of answer. Flossie drew her usual little chair near to his side, and sat down, while all the servants came in. Hugh read aloud part of the fourteenth chapter of St. John, in his deep tones, which faltered a little now and then, and a few large burning tears fell secretly from Flossie's eyes, during the earnest prayer which followed. But she seemed quite calm when they all

rose. She brought out the caddy, and made the tea, and busied herself about the room, much after her usual fashion at that time in the day,—only that the chatter which Hugh loved was wanting. No words passed her lips. She only did all that had to be done, and then came back to his side, and rested her head against him once more.

"Flossie, what shall you and I do to-day?"

"I don't know."

"I can't make up my mind about one thing,—whether you had better go on with your lessons a few days longer, or have holidays altogether until——"

Flossie knew what he meant.

"What does my little woman think? I can't have her fretting herself ill; and yet—I don't know about lessons."

"I couldn't do them to-day, please, Hugh," said Flossie rather faintly.

"No, I don't think you could. But after to-day——"

"Hugh, please let me be with you all the time."

"Dearest, I have many things to do. I cannot be at home all day long. But I will arrange to give up my afternoons and evenings to you. Just in the mornings I think it would be best and happiest for you still to go on with your lessons."

"I'll do anything you want," said Flossie very low. And then the toast and eggs were brought in,

and she went to her seat, and poured out the tea. Eating proved to be almost as much of a pretence as it had been the evening before. The meal was soon over. Flossie rang the bell to have the things cleared away, and then went back again to her old quarters. She wanted nothing now but to cling close to Hugh till the last moment before separation, whenever that might be. She did wish Hugh would tell her how soon it must come, but to ask the question was an utter impossibility. As for her own future, after the parting, she gave it no thought at all. It was to be life without Hugh, and life without Hugh was only a dreary blank.

"Flossie, I have to go to the Vicarage this morning. Will you come with me?"

"Please," she said, without moving.

"It won't pain you too much, if Willa is full of her cousins' coming?"

"I'll go, if you go," was the answer. And after a moment Flossie added, "Willa needn't say anything about it. I can't talk to her——"

"Dear little Flossie, I am afraid you will have to hear talk about it very soon."

"Oh, no; please don't say any more."

She hid her face in his arm for a moment, and Hugh sighed, but only answered, "Then get on your hat, dear. I am going early, so as to find Mr. Knight at home."

In a few minutes they started together,—Flossie's little feet going quickly and softly beside Hugh's heavier and slower tread. It was a very sober face which showed beneath her shady straw hat. And the brim was kept down so low in front, that she had much more chance of seeing the dew-drops glittering on the lawn at her feet, than the blue February sky overhead. Hugh could catch a glimpse of nothing beyond a pair of sorrowfully curved lips. The walk was a very silent one. It was a pretty walk, too, even this wintry day, when no leaves were visible on the trees, and the hedges showed but faint signs of budding life. Some promises of an early spring might have been discovered here and there, had either Hugh or Flossie been disposed to look out for them. But the two only paced quietly on, side-by-side, through the long narrow lane which led them into the village. They did not pause till the gate of Easthill Vicarage was reached.

"Hugh, are you going into the study?" asked Flossie in an anxious tone, as she stood waiting by his side in the drawing-room.

"I don't quite know, dear. Ah, here is Mr. Knight," as the clergyman came in, with a handful of papers, and a little girl following.

"How do you do, Mr. Silverthorn? I fancied I should see you to-day. So Flossie is taking an early walk with you this morning?" and he looked

at her very kindly, in a way which showed Flossie that he both knew of her trouble, and felt for her in it. Flossie was most grateful to him for saying no more. She did not feel as if she could bear to have it spoken about as yet.

"Papa, shall I take Flossie away to my play-room?" asked Willa, a bright merry-looking little damsel of about twelve years old, evidently brimming over with repressed excitement.

"Ay, do so, my dear. When Mr. Silverthorn and I have done our business, we will let you know."

Flossie looked beseechingly at Hugh; but he said gently, "Yes, dearest, for a little while;" and she submitted at once. Willa seized her hand, and went out with a dancing step into the passage.

"It's lovely, your coming in just now, Flossie, because Mamma is ever so busy, and she has to go off directly to see somebody, and she was going to leave me to do my lessons all alone. I can't bear doing my lessons all alone. She says I needn't begin now till you are gone, so you must stay ever so long. Now, will you?"

"I don't know," said Flossie; "I shall go with Hugh, when he goes."

"Couldn't he leave you behind, and call for you by-and-by? I dare say he is going somewhere else."

"Oh, no! Oh, no, thank you, Willa. I must go with him."

"Well, come along now, and let us have a good talk," said Willa, opening the door of a snug-looking little play-room, half filled with empty boxes, half crowded with toys. "You won't be cold here, Flossie; it is such a warm day; and the next room fire always warms this."

"Oh, no, I am not cold."

"Flossie, Mamma says I may speak to you *now* about—about——"

Willa hesitated a moment, and tried to peep under Flossie's drooping hat.

"At least, she said I might, if you didn't mind; because Mr. Silverthorn was going to tell you yesterday evening. You know what I mean, Flossie?"

Flossie made no answer at all.

"I wish you wouldn't poke your face round in that way; I can't see it a bit. O Flossie! only think," and Willa gave a sudden leap of joy, "only think what it will be to have cousins here always! Won't it be lovely? I've always longed to have Chenda for my friend,—another friend, you know, besides you, because I never could stop loving you, could I, Flossie? We've been friends now for a whole year and a quarter, ever since Papa came away from Elburton. And then it will be so beautiful for Mamma to have Aunt Elsie living close to her. Flossie, do speak a little, and take off your hat. You're not angry with me, are you?"

For the hand which Willa put out was very decidedly repulsed. Willa stood looking for a moment in some perplexity.

"I'm sure you will love Chenda and Aunt Elsie and all of them. Chenda is a year older than you, and Elsie is a year younger. I wonder which you will have for your friend most. I wish it were Elsie, and then I should have Chenda, and we could always be two and two. Mamma says Aunt Elsie will be just like a mother to you, Flossie," went on Willa, little knowing the harm she might do with her thoughtless chatter.

"I don't want a mother! I want nobody but Hugh!" Flossie broke out passionately, with a struggling sob before and after the words. "I wish—I wish you would go away."

Both children sat silent for a little while, Willa wearing a somewhat hurt expression on her round good-tempered little face.

"It isn't very kind of you to talk like that, Flossie. I can't help being glad they are coming, and Aunt Elsie is my own aunt, you know, though I don't remember her. Of course I am sorry Mr. Silverthorn is going away, ever so sorry; but then you will be very happy with my cousins; and some day he'll come back again. I don't see what there is to make you angry."

Poor little aching half-broken heart,—how impossible for Willa to measure its pain!

"And Aunt Elsie is Mamma's particular own pet favourite sister; so, of course, it's nice for them to live near together," went on Willa in a slightly injured tone. "And Mamma has always wanted for me to know Chenda and Elsie. And there's Edric and Vernon, and poor little Gerard as well. Why, Flossie, we shall have all sorts of fun, all of us together. Just think what games we'll play."

Flossie wearily wondered whether her own home was really to be in Easthill, or whether Hugh would leave her at some school, as she had fancied. She asked no questions, however, and Willa began to think her little friend was very hard to comfort.

"Wouldn't you like to see Mamma, Flossie?" A shake of the head answered her. "Because I don't believe she's gone out yet. Wouldn't you?" Another and more decided shake.

"Don't you mean to say a word to me all the time you're here?" asked Willa, after a pause.

"If you won't talk—about—about that," said Flossie, half-choked.

"But I don't see how I can help it," said Willa, rather doubtfully, "because my head is stuffed as full as ever it can hold of cousins. I don't think I *could* talk of anything else to-day,—I really don't think I could."

Flossie was silent, and Willa meditated for a few seconds.

"Were you very much surprised, Flossie, when Mr. Silverthorn told you that the Grove belonged really to Uncle Norman, and not to him? I've known it three whole days, do you know, and I have been brimming over all the time to talk about it to you. Mamma thought you were going to hear it that day, or she wouldn't have told me; but I *can* keep a secret, you know,—can't I? It seems so queer that Mr. Silverthorn's house should really be Uncle Norman's. Isn't it a good thing that Uncle Norman and Aunt Elsie have reached England just now,—in the very nick of time, Betty says. Mamma is so impatient to see Aunt Elsie, but they won't come on here for another fortnight. They've taken lodgings in London, and Chenda and Elsie and the boys are all with them. It must be so queer for cousins to be with a papa and a mamma that they don't know. All except poor little Gerard, and he has never left them, of course. Flossie, I expect in a little while Chenda and Elsie will be just like your very own sisters. Why, Flossie——"

Willa stopped short, for Flossie had suddenly risen and left the room. Willa hesitated a moment, and then ran out likewise, to find her little friend standing in the passage, with a white uncertain face.

"Flossie, you are not offended with me? Flossie, what's the matter? Won't you come back?"

But at that moment the drawing-room door opened, and the two gentlemen came out.

"Ah! here are the children," said Mr. Knight. "Poor little one!" and he patted Flossie's shoulder kindly. "We will do our best to make her happy among us all."

He accompanied them through the garden, and down to the gate, which he held open.

"I shall see you again to-morrow or the day after. Make any use of me that you can, Mr. Silverthorn. You have our sincerest sympathy."

"I do not doubt it, but I am not so unreasonable as to expect you to forget your cause for rejoicing in our sorrow," Hugh answered calmly. "Good-bye. Thank you, no, I can't stay longer now; I am in haste to be at home."

He wanted to have his little Flossie to himself, for one glance at her face had shown him that her visit had been the reverse of comforting. But just when the front door of the Grove was reached, she drew her hand out of his.

"Hugh, please, I am going upstairs; don't come too: I'll be back presently."

And he did not follow, though it was hard to keep away. Had he known the tempest of passionate sorrow through which his cherished pet was passing, during the next two hours, his reso-

lution could hardly have served him. But he felt it was best that her grief should have vent, and he was aware that she would continue to fight for composure so long as he was present. So he only sat in the study, and waited for her to reappear.

CHAPTER IV.

A CORNER IN THE GARRETS.

THE two o'clock dinner-bell rang, and Hugh started from a fit of deep thought into which he had sunk, while sitting at his desk, pen in hand.

"Why, it must be three hours since Flossie went upstairs! Where can she be?"

He left the room, intending to search for her, but Nurse met him on the stairs.

"Please, sir, I don't think I'd disturb Miss Flossie, if I was you. The bell hasn't woke her, and the longer she sleeps the better. It wasn't much rest she had last night."

Nurse sighed, and there was a certain moisture standing in her eyes.

"Asleep, is she?" said Hugh. "Where?"

"Upstairs, sir. I'll take you to her after dinner, but I wouldn't disturb her without need be, and she couldn't eat now, if she was to wake." "I'm not going to spoil *your* appetite, with showing her to you yet," thought Nurse.

Hugh yielded, as the household generally did

yield, to Nurse's decree, and sat for a while at the dinner-table, eating a little, and musing a great deal. Then he sent for Nurse, and asked where he could find Flossie.

"I'll show you, sir."

But she did not go to the nursery or the school-room, as Hugh had expected. She turned away to the back-stairs, and led him up into the spacious dusty garrets. Flossie was wont sometimes to go up there for a game of play, and many of her toys lay carelessly about hither and thither. Nurse passed through two or three of the lumber-stored rooms, and then paused, as she opened another door.

"Don't wake her, please, sir."

Hugh shook his head, and walked in. He would have found it hard to speak at that moment.

Poor little Flossie! She had pulled off her hat and one of her gloves, and curled herself up in a nook between two large boxes, where she might indulge her grief undisturbed. The storm of sorrow had passed away now, leaving the heavy after-calm, —but she sobbed at intervals in her sleep, and the pale face was all blistered and swollen with passionate weeping.

"She's cried till she couldn't cry no longer," murmured Nurse. "You won't disturb her, sir?"

"No,—I am only going to wait here till she wakes. You need not stay, Nurse."

And Nurse withdrew. But Hugh's waiting-time was long. For an hour passed, and another hour, and half an hour after that, and five o'clock was not far distant, when Flossie gave her first sign of rousing up.

She might have settled off again to sleep even then, but Hugh decided the question for her by taking her hand gently in his own. She started to her feet with a bewildered look.

"Hugh!—oh, where am I? O Hugh!—I dreamt you were gone——"

"Flossie, what made you choose such a place as this to sleep in?"

"I don't know. I'm so tired," said the child heavily.

"Come with me, and have some tea. This has been a day of starvation for you."

"What o'clock is it?" asked Flossie.

"Nearly five o'clock. Shall we go into the drawing-room to-day?"

"Oh, no, please,—the library,—as long as can be," she said mournfully.

Hugh could not bear to contradict her, though he would have liked to break through the strength of those twilight associations. He took her downstairs, and placed her in his easy-chair, and ordered up the tea-tray. Then he made the tea, and poured it out, and fed her with thin slices of bread and butter, tenderly as a mother might have done.

Flossie said nothing beyond a few faint 'thank-yous,' but let him do just as he liked, and ate as much as he told her. And presently the tray was taken downstairs, and Hugh resumed his usual seat in the chair, and Flossie squeezed into her old corner.

"I think my little woman is better now," he said.

"I'm so sorry, Hugh; I didn't mean to stay away so long from you," said Flossie, with quiet sadness. "I couldn't help it though."

"Dearest, why should you go alone to grieve?" he asked, stroking her head gently. "It is my sorrow as well as yours. Only you and I can feel quite together in this."

"Willa can't," said Flossie. Somehow, she could bear to speak of the matter now. "Willa is so glad."

"Not glad of your trouble, dearest."

"No,—but to have her cousins."

"I think that is natural. We must not expect them to think only of us."

"No,—oh, I know——"

"Flossie, don't you care to know where you are going to live?" asked Hugh.

"I don't know," said Flossie faintly. "Willa seemed to think—at least—O Hugh, she made me feel so dreadfully—and I could not help it."

"Dear Flossie, you will feel it, and you must.

God does not mean us not to be grieved when He sends trouble."

"Ah, but I mean I felt so *bad*," sobbed Flossie. "She said Mrs. Marshall would be like a mother to me,—and I know she meant instead of you,—and it did make me *hate* Mrs. Marshall so,—O Hugh, you can't think!"

"Willa does not know. She cannot understand," said Hugh, distressed at the child's excessive though quiet grief. "No one can ever take my place, I am sure. Mrs. Marshall will be very kind to you, and I believe she is a very sweet person. My Flossie will not hate her, because of Willa's careless words. But she will not be *Hugh* to you. Dear Flossie, it is not Mrs. Marshall or Chenda, but One quite different — my own Friend and Master,—whom I want to leave in my place to comfort you. HE loves His little handmaid far more dearly than I can do."

"Oh, no, no: I am not His handmaid."

"But you want to be. He will make you so. He will love to have you so."

Flossie bitterly felt that she cared for nothing just then, except to have Hugh's arm around her.

"I wanted to tell you yesterday that your home will still be here, but you could not bear it then, darling. It will not be so bad as if you had to go to a strange place."

"I don't know. They will be strangers to me," said Flossie. "Hugh, don't—don't—little girls—*ever* go to China?"

"I dare not take you to the part where I am going. And even if it would not injure your health, there would be other almost greater difficulties. I should be away hard at work all day long. How could I leave my Flossie all alone among Chinese servants, with no one to train her or teach her, or keep her out of evil?"

"Oh, but, Hugh, Nurse would come with us."

"I could not afford to take her. I am a poor man now. My dear, it is utterly impossible that you should go to China. You may be sure that I would take you if I could."

Flossie sighed—one deep hopeless sigh.

"My greatest comfort will be to think of you in the old home. It will seem hard at first, but by-and-by you will feel brighter, and you will begin to look forward to seeing me again."

"How soon?"

"By-and-by; I cannot fix any time, my darling." Too well he knew how many years might pass before they met again.

"And—how soon——?"

Flossie's fortitude was not equal to asking *that* question. She put her head down on his shoulder, and cried bitterly. The floodgates once opened were hard to close again.

"How soon must I leave England, do you mean, Flossie?"

She made a motion of assent.

"It will not be long."

Flossie half raised herself, with a terrified look. "You don't mean—it isn't—it isn't *yet?*"

"Did Willa tell you anything about her uncle and aunt coming?"

"She said—I think—a fortnight," faltered the child.

"Yes; a fortnight from yesterday. They have been most kind, and have left all fixing of dates to me."

Flossie passed over the last words, hardly seeming to hear what he said. "But you—when—O Hugh—*you* will be here!"

"Flossie, would you rather be alone with me up to the last, or would you rather have them all here for some days beforehand? If so, they will have to come a week sooner."

He spoke very slowly. Flossie's face was like marble, and she gasped for breath.

"Oh, no,—Oh, no,—you don't mean——"

Hugh drew her closer into his arms, and held her tightly there for a few minutes. Once a burning tear fell down upon her face, and she gave a startled look up.

"O Hugh, don't, please. I didn't know I was making you so sorry. I don't mean to be naughty,

indeed——" and the poor little white face tried to get up a pitiful smile. "I would be braver, if I could,—if only it wouldn't be such a weight on here;" and she put her hand to her chest. "O Hugh, can't you tell me, please, that you don't mean just that?—because I don't think I *can* bear it."

Hugh could hardly command his voice to say huskily, "Would you rather have me alone, or learn to know them all before I go?"

"I'd rather have you all to myself. Please let me."

"I was sure you would. Only, dear, you might be happier if they were less of strangers to you."

"It won't make the least difference. Please, Hugh, we'll be alone together—as long—as long as——"

And then she looked beseechingly at him. "Yes, I will tell you," he said tenderly. "My darling must know. Dear Flossie, God will help you and me to bear it. I must leave Easthill to-morrow fortnight. The Marshalls will be in the house for two nights beforehand,—just that I may put my precious one into their charge. I have thought it best that you and I should keep to ourselves up to that time."

Flossie silently squeezed one of his hands over her face, but answered by neither look nor word.

"I would have put off longer going, had it been possible. But I have no right to live on here. And this appointment,—this work, which will bring me in money,—makes it needful for me to start quickly. I could not resolve to tell you till near the time."

He had told, and she had heard the worst now. But the telling and the hearing had been very bitter. Flossie could talk no more that evening.

CHAPTER V.

THE MARSHALL FAMILY.

"THREE days more! and then—hurrah for Easthill!"

"Now, Vernon, just see—you've tilted over my paint-box. And I had put out my wet paints so nicely to dry."

"They'll dry every atom as well on the table-cloth as in the box."

"They won't, though," muttered Elsie, picking up the cakes, with vermilion-stained fingers, and a passing cloud on her sunny face. "O dear me! what teases boys are to be sure!"

"Well, what's a fellow to do?" demanded Vernon. "It is all very well for you girls to sit mewed up here, smudging old pictures with paint, and making pen-wipers." He glanced as he spoke towards his twin-sister, Richenda, a particularly pretty girl of about twelve or thirteen years old, seated at a small work-table in one of the windows. "But we boys can't come down to that sort of thing, you know; and there's nothing on earth to

be done in these wretched lodgings. How I do detest London to be sure!"

"Why don't you read, like Edric?" asked Elsie, dabbling her paint-brush in a mug of discoloured water.

Vernon made a face.

"Well, you needn't shake over all my paints, now I am getting them straight again," said Elsie, as he took to jogging up and down on the table, where he had found a seat.

"Bother! What *may* I do then? Look here, Elsie, you're a good-tempered little affair on the whole; but it won't do for you to begin setting your elders to rights, or you'll grow disagreeable. I say, Chenda, what sort of a child do you suppose this is that Papa means to adopt?"

"Mamma believes she is a very nice child," said Chenda demurely, as she snipped the edges of her pen-wiper.

"Floss-silk is to be her name, eh?"

"No; Flora—Flossie for short. I don't know which we shall call her. But Papa won't allow you to tease her about that or anything else."

"Why not, pray?"

"Because she will be a stranger among us all, and we shall have to make her feel at home," replied Chenda, who always tried to speak as much as possible like a grown-up person.

"Stuff and nonsense!" said Vernon. "She will be

ever so much more at home than we ourselves. Why, she has lived there pretty nearly all her life."

"Yes; and all the time it has really been Papa's house," said Chenda. "If only we had known it!"

'Wonder what Willa is like?" remarked Vernon.

'Oh, I don't fancy she is anything very particular. I do want to see Aunt Netta though. Mamma says I am so like what she was at my age."

"That's putting it strong," said Vernon. "You think she was pretty, and so you want to be like her; but you know Mamma says you are not half so like as she used to think you would be."

"I don't believe Mamma has said anything of the sort;" and Chenda flushed with evident annoyance.

"She did though, not two days ago.'

"I don't believe it. Edric has seen Aunt Netta, and *he* knows I'm like her."

The tall lad of fifteen, lounging and reading in the sofa-corner, just glanced over the top of his book, but made no remark.

"He heard you, Chenda; but he is too polite to contradict," said Vernon teasingly.

"Feature-likeness, not expression," mumbled Edric, with a droll expression in the corners of his eyes.

"I don't know what you mean," said Chenda coldly. "I only believe what Mamma says."

"Chenda, are you going to take presents to all of them?" asked Elsie, who had been humming a very unmusical tune over her paint-box, in happy disregard of her sister's discomfiture.

"All whom?" asked Chenda stiffly.

"Uncle Duncan and Aunt Netta and Willa. Is Flossie Silverthorn our cousin?"

"Of course not," said Chenda. "She is no relation of ours. Papa is taking her in out of charity."

"Charity!" said Elsie, with wide-open eyes. "Is that like when people put money in a plate at church, because it is a charity-sermon?"

Edric put his book suddenly down. "If Flossie isn't a relation, she is a connection at all events,—through old Aunt Forrester. Chenda, you really should not say such a thing before the children;" and he glanced from Elsie's attentive face to a little white delicate boy, with large black eyes, and blue unhealthy-looking lips, seated somewhat forlornly apart, on a stool in the corner of the room.

Chenda was never known to allow herself to be in the wrong. "It is true," she said. "And Mr. Silverthorn must have been living on Papa's money all these years."

"Never knowing it. Papa says Mr. Silverthorn has behaved beautifully,—most honourably. He

has told me things which only make me wish I could be like him."

"What things?" Chenda did not like others to be told more than herself. Unconsciously, this conversation was sowing a little seed of dislike in her heart towards Hugh and Flossie Silverthorn.

Edric made no answer. "I say, Gerard, what are you doing down there?"

Poor little Gerard, who felt somewhat dreary among these new strong strange brothers and sisters, looked timidly back in answer. "I'm only waiting because Mamma said I might come to her in half an hour."

"Chenda, can't you look after the child a little? He seems to have no one to attend to him."

"He can paint like Elsie, I suppose," said Chenda.

Edric half began to read again, and then sat up, and beckoned. "Come, let's have a look at you."

Gerard came slowly across the room, and submitted to being placed on his brother's knee. "What makes you look so grave?" asked Edric, rather at a loss what to talk about to this silent delicate child.

Gerard played with his own sleeve, but made no answer. "Getting impatient to see Mamma again, eh?"

"I don't know when it'll be time," said Gerard. "A half-hour is so long."

"When did it begin?"

"Oh, I don't know,—a long *long* while ago," said Gerard, with a sigh.

"Why don't you get something to do, instead of sitting in the corner? What a queer little chap you are!"

"I don't know what to do."

"Have a game of play."

The heavy black eyes looked surprised for a moment.

"Don't you know what play is? I have never seen you in a single game since I came home. Mother says you're not to be made to play, but wouldn't you like it?"

Gerard shook his head. "No, I'm tired. I can't. It hurts me."

"But you're not always tired, are you?"

"Sometimes not when I'm in bed," said Gerard, after a pause for consideration. "Please, isn't the half-hour over?"

"Why, you can't tell me when it began, so how can I tell when it ends? Come, we'll go and look out."

Somehow Edric's conscience reproached him a little for the small attention he and the others had paid to this child. He seemed so weakly, and silent, and timid, and so fond of sitting apart, that they

had deemed him dull and uninteresting, and had left him very much to himself. Edric wondered whether they had not been unkindly neglectful of the little stranger-brother. And he took the tiny white hand in his own, and walked across the passage to the drawing-room.

"Mother, are you busy?" he asked, putting in his head.

A lady with a very sweet and very delicate face was lying upon a sofa near the window, having a rich Indian shawl spread over her feet. "No, I am not busy now," she said. "I was just wanting Gerard."

"I'll leave him here then," said Edric.

"Unless you will stay for a few minutes. What are you all doing in the other room?"

Gerard crept to a stool by her side, and settled himself down there, with a look of perfect content. Edric hesitated a moment, and then balanced himself on the arm of a large chair. "Doing! oh,—I have been reading, and Chenda working, and Elsie painting, and Vernon,—nothing particular."

"That seems Vernon's usual occupation, I am afraid."

"Something like it," said Edric, with a laugh. "He is an awfully idle fellow."

"It is the old baby-character developed," said Mrs. Marshall. "Just as you used to be always spelling over your little books."

"It must seem odd to you, mother, to see us all so much bigger, and yet the same," said Edric, in his quaint abrupt fashion. "I'm afraid our noise is a great bother to you."

"I wish I were strong enough to bear it better. It is a real trouble to me to banish you all so much.

"Oh, that doesn't matter; and you know you couldn't stand Vernon and Elsie's goings on."

"I shall have to make you my prime-minister in my absence," said Mrs. Marshall, half-smiling.

Edric shook his head. "I don't interfere—generally," he said. "I like to take things easy."

"But you would interfere if you saw anything wrong."

"Well, if there was nobody else," said Edric reluctantly. "But there's going to be a governess."

"Yes. Still I want to feel, Edric, that I may trust to you in one or two matters. For instance——"

She hesitated, and glanced down at the child by her side. "He's asleep," said Edric. "Mother, what makes him like this?—so different from other boys! Why, at nine years old he ought to be up to lots of fun."

Edric marvelled at his mother's look of deep sorrow. "I never could bear to write it home, and I never could part with him," she said very low.

"But I have been thinking that I would tell you —as our eldest. Come a little nearer, Edric. I want you to understand how needful it is that there should be no rough play or teasing. He cannot stand it."

"Wouldn't it harden him up a little bit?" asked Edric.

"No, no,—oh, no." He bent down in answer to her gesture, and listened to some low words of explanation,—his own face growing very grave.

"Mother, are you quite sure? Can't there be any mistake?"

"None. My poor little Gerard!"

She looked very sadly down upon him, and a sort of faint shadow passed over the small white face.

"He is dreaming, I think. O Edric, you will be very tender with him."

"Trust me, mother," said the boy, more moved than perhaps he had ever been, except by that dim seven-years' distant parting with his parents. The earlier parting, five years before, had faded away into mist.

"Don't tell Chenda. Children let things slip so carelessly; and he is too young to know his own state. You are thoughtful, Edric. I think you will be kind to him."

Poor anxious mother! for years her very heart-strings had been twined round this frail little one,

all the more because she felt that she held him with so uncertain a grasp. These other children of hers, to whom she had come home, seemed so wonderfully healthy, and vigorous, and independent, in comparison. There was a certain quiet thoughtfulness about the eldest, which made her turn to him, but the remaining three were so self-contained and gay-spirited, so absorbed in their own concerns, and so reserved in the giving out of affection, that she really hardly felt as yet that she had fully made their acquaintance.

The clinging gentleness and deep humility of the mother was in curious contrast with the bright buoyant complacency of her children,—Edric and Gerard excepted. Edric was very like his father, Gerard very like his mother. The three between were like neither. They seemed to have grown into a comfortable facility of making themselves happy anywhere, and with anybody,—took their parents' return composedly,—and chiefly rejoiced in the thoughts of Easthill, because they hoped there to have "plenty of fun." What depth of heart lay within these smooth bright caskets, —for they were very attractive children,—Mrs. Marshall could but wait to learn.

CHAPTER VI.

A NEW MASTER IN THE HOUSE.

THEY were coming at last. Slowly to the Marshalls and the Knights, but oh, how quickly to the Silverthorns, the fortnight had passed away!

"Now, Miss Flossie darling, you're going to look your best this evening, ain't you? It is hard, I know, and I'm sure I feel all in a boil whenever I think of it,—their coming to turn Master out of his house like this, and he taking it so patient and beautiful. But there, they do say the Colonel has the right; and when a man has the right, he'll most often stick to it. 'Tisn't to be expected he shouldn't, I suppose. Anyway, I want them to take to you at first, Miss Flossie; for it'll make a deal of difference in your happiness if they do. So you'll be nice and bright, won't you, my dear? and hold up your face, and give 'em a welcome—though it's a deal more than they deserve," said Nurse, varying somewhat in her manner of speech, as feeling and prudence by turns gained the upper hand.

Poor Flossie looked very little like holding up her face and being bright. She sat drooping on a

nursery chair, in the simple white dress and blue sash which Nurse had carefully selected, her thick brown curls being arranged with extra care. Flossie had objected to such attire, on the ground that it seemed as if she were rejoicing, instead of sorrowing, at the expected arrivals; but Nurse's desire that she should make a good impression prevailed.

"And you ain't going to cry any more, are you, darling? You'll try to keep your hair neat and nice. If you go and give your head a shake, the curls do fall out so, and get mixed up all together like wild."

"I don't feel like crying," said Flossie dejectedly; "I wish my head didn't ache so."

"And then you wouldn't look so white, nor so black under your eyes," said Nurse, still absorbed in the desire that her child should be appreciated. "There,—you're all in a fever to go off to Master, ain't you? Just let me put your sash straight—so—that's it, my dear. You'll do now. If they've got hearts at all, they can't help pitying nor loving her," thought Nurse sorrowfully, as Flossie passed out of the room. And Nurse sat down and indulged in the very thing she had just forbidden to Flossie,—a very hearty cry.

Hugh was in the drawing-room when his sister entered with the heavy lagging step which had marked her of late. She went and stood by him.

and then put her face down on his knee, forgetful of Nurse's injunctions respecting her curls.

"My poor little woman is very tired to-night."

"O Hugh, I wish I could go to bed, and not see them."

"Dear child, it would be worse in the morning."

"I know—I'm trying to be brave—I'm trying, Hugh——" The poor little pale face was lifted with a quivering smile.

"My precious one, I know you are."

"Only it is hard," said Flossie faintly. "O Hugh, it does hurt so."

"What does, Flossie?"

"I don't know. When I look at you, and think—O Hugh, it is like a great pain all through me—O Hugh, I *can't* bear to think of the day after to-morrow—this time——"

A shivering tearless sob broke from her. Hugh made no answer in words, but he brought her two hands together, and she heard his voice uttering short words of prayer. Very simple—very brief—but how he pleaded for her and himself! The strong man and the weak child stood alike in utter helplessness upon the brink of this river of sorrow, through which they had to pass.

"Flossie darling, there is no strength but *His* which can help us through."

"I've asked Him, but I don't think He helps me much."

"I think He does. I have seen it in my Flossie's patience and gentleness all this fortnight. There *was* a time when trouble made her naughty and fractious. Dear Flossie, I think He is giving you strength,—only just enough minute by minute, so you must not look on ahead, or you will find you have not enough. I think—maybe—He is keeping the *comfort* till by-and-by, when you will need it more."

Flossie sighed, yet felt in a measure soothed.

"Hugh, there's a carriage coming," she whispered. "Oh, stay here, won't you?"

"Don't you want to come and welcome them?" She was icy cold and trembling. He drew her on his knee, and spoke cheerfully. "Why, Flossie, one would think they were a set of Hottentots or wild beasts, you are so frightened at them. Do you know, I have asked Mr. and Mrs. Knight to tea, and I suspect they are in the breakfast-room or hall now. I thought it would leave you and me rather more free. Mrs. Knight and Mrs. Marshall have not seen one another for seven years, so they must feel very impatient. Perhaps it is kindest to leave them to have their meeting without our standing by to look on."

"Don't go!"

"Would you have liked me to ask Willa too? I was not sure."

"Oh, no—I don't want her to-night."

"Do you think Chenda will be very like Willa?" asked Hugh, determined to allow no time for thought, or for listening to the buzz of voices which had just begun in the hall. Flossie grew whiter, and held his arm more tightly.

"I don't know. Willa says she's like—like Mrs. Knight," said Flossie, with an effort. "O Hugh! they're coming."

He gave her one firm quieting kiss, then rose, and went towards the door.

"Colonel and Mrs. Marshall, sir."

The announcement was followed by such an invasion of people, that Flossie felt perfectly bewildered. She kept close to Hugh's side, but her dazzled eyes saw nothing distinctly. Somebody kissed her, and somebody shook her hands, and several others followed their example, but whether they were grown-up people or children, Flossie had no power to decide.

Gradually they all subsided into seats, and the bustle of the first entrance settled down into a quieter hum of conversation. Flossie found herself standing close to Hugh's chair, with downcast eyes, and it suddenly struck her that she was by no means acting as Hugh would have wished her to do. She lifted her head, and took a good look round, though not without a considerable effort.

Mr. and Mrs. Knight, Colonel and Mrs. Marshall, two girls, and three boys; no wonder the

room appeared full. Flossie glanced from one to the other with growing interest. The grave quiet sun-burnt Colonel was talking to Mr. Knight and Hugh; the two elder boys were standing not far from the door, and Chenda and Elsie had each found a seat near the table. Flossie turned from them involuntarily, to examine the two sisters on the sofa, sitting there hand in hand, with a joy which would hardly yet admit of speech. Poor Flossie felt desolate indeed in comparison, and a rush of tears threatened to overflow, and had to be strangled back.

Mrs. Knight's pretty bright face was very familiar to Flossie, and she always liked to look at it, and to have a smile from her. But the other was darker, paler, sadder in its usual expression, and almost as frail as that of the little delicate boy who never left her side. Flossie felt that she *could* some day perhaps learn to love Mrs. Marshall, if only—ah, if only people would not hint at her ever taking Hugh's place. And with that thought Flossie's eyes sank hopelessly again, as the wave of her great trouble rolled back over her.

"Flossie, the Colonel wants to speak to you."

It was Mr. Knight who spoke. Flossie gave one of her appealing looks at Hugh, but he said gently, "Go, my darling," and she submitted to the Colonel's taking her hand, and drawing her between his knees.

"My new little girl, I have to make your acquaintance. Is Flossie the name we are to call you by?"

"Please," was all Flossie could say.

"And you are willing to become my child now, are you?"

"Oh, no, I'm Hugh's," said Flossie hurriedly.

"Hugh's sister."

"And his child, and everything."

"Don't you think you will have a little of your heart to give to us, after giving a very great piece to your brother?"

"I think I give it all to him," broke sorrowfully from Flossie, and she turned with a quick movement towards him, but the Colonel did not release her.

"Little Flossie, do you know, the heart is not like a thing of a certain fixed size, to be cut up into larger or smaller pieces. It is like that flame—the more it has to feed upon, the more it grows. You mustn't keep it to one coal, however large that coal may be."

Flossie gave him one doubtful earnest look.

"You may love your brother with all your heart, and yet you may have a great deal of heart to spare for other people. That is a strange thing, isn't it? But we shall all want a piece of this little heart, and that will make it grow bigger and bigger, you know; so that by-and-by, when

Hugh' comes home, he will find *such* a large one waiting to welcome him."

Flossie did not know what to make of the Colonel at all. She liked his quiet sober manner, and deliberate way of speaking, and little grave smile; but it was a new fashion of comforting altogether in her experience.

"I wonder which of you children is the tallest," said Colonel Marshall. "Come, Chenda, Elsie, stand side by side. Ah, Flossie is not tall yet; she is scarcely over Elsie's height."

"And a year older," said Chenda, holding her head erect; "and a year younger than I am."

Then a general move was made. Dinner-tea had been laid out in the dining-room. Mrs. Marshall was too much fatigued to attempt sitting up, or even lying on the drawing-room sofa, and she retired at once to her own room. Flossie was requested to show Chenda and Elsie their room which she did; but she fled downstairs again to her brother, without uttering a needless word. And half an hour later the party all met round the table, Mrs. Knight undertaking to sit at the head. Flossie was no longer little mistress of the household. She felt it,—only as part of the one great heart-ache,—but she did feel it. Never again to sit there, making tea for her brother! It was very, very hard to bear.

Meanwhile, Nurse was sent for, and requested

to wait upon Mrs. Marshall. Grim and silent came Nurse, forgetting her own wise injunctions to Flossie, and feeling much as a devoted servant of King Charles the First might have felt, had he been compelled to wait upon Cromwell. But the gentle usurper in the best bedroom was a somewhat different person from Oliver of old.

"What a sweet-looking child Flossie is, Nurse! It makes me quite sad to look at her."

If Mrs. Marshall had set herself to soften Nurse towards herself, she could hardly have chosen a wiser method. Nurse's tongue was loosened at once.

"And that she is, ma'am. I don't know as I ever saw a sweeter. And loves her brother—no, ma'am, I don't know how she'll bear the parting; I don't really. She isn't the same child she was a fortnight since. Always so lightsome and happy, and now she just drags herself about like an old woman, and don't seem to have spirits for nothing."

"It will be better for her when the worst is over."

"May be so, ma'am. I couldn't say. Miss Flossie ain't a forgetful sort of child like most. Things take hold of her somehow. It's pitiful to see her trying to keep up, and sighing once in a while as if her heart was nigh to breaking. I don't know as it isn't."

"It is very touching to see a child suffer so," said Mrs. Marshall, with a moisture in her eyes.

"You see, ma'am, she don't shake it off, and play about between whiles, like most. All this fortnight she's lived in the dread of the day after to-morrow. Never able to rest, unless she was by his side—Master's I mean. Master tried to make her go on with her lessons, but it wasn't no good. She was fit for nothing but to lie about when he wasn't at hand, and to sit leaning up against him when he was."

"And you have been with her long yourself?"

"Since she was six weeks old, ma'am. I've never left her, nor never would of my own free will."

Nurse looked anxiously as she spoke, unaware as yet whether she herself would be retained in Mrs. Marshall's service, though she knew that the matter had been under consideration, and that Mr. Silverthorn had spoken in her favour.

"I don't think it will be by my will if you leave her now, Nurse."

"Thank you, ma'am," was all Nurse could falter.

"You must help us to make her happy. And Master Gerard, too, will be in your charge; he needs very tender care."

And a long talk followed about Gerard's delicacy and Flossie's grief. Nurse's heart was won from that hour.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BITTERNESS OF PARTING.

FLOSSIE'S last day with Hugh!

She hardly knew how it passed—whether slowly or whether quickly. Slowly, for every hour was one long pressure of pain. Quickly, for all too soon it was over.

She saw hardly anything of the Marshalls, except at meal-times, and then they pityingly did not force her to talk. Hugh had to be away for some hours in the morning, and during his absence she escaped to her far-off corner among the boxes in the garrets, and hid herself till his return. But she did not cry this time. She only lay flat upon the dusty ground, with her head pillowed on her arm, feeling sorely sick and weary.

Then, in the afternoon, Hugh took her out for a short walk, but he soon had to bring her back. They were left to themselves alone in the library. Nobody came near them; but neither was equal to much talking. Now and then Hugh spoke a few words, either about his return in the future,

or about the letters they would write meantime. But the greater part of the time they only sat patient and silent. It would have been hard to say which of the two was suffering most keenly.

And then night came—one long half-waking dream of pain to Flossie. It was well, perhaps, that Hugh had to start early on the morrow. Breakfast was begun somewhat late, and the carriage stood at the door before they had finished. Flossie looked and felt like one half stunned. The sound of the coming wheels made her shiver and draw her chair closer to Hugh's. He rose with an apology for disturbing the assembled party. "I am afraid I shall miss my train if I delay," he said. "But you will let me go quietly."

Mrs. Marshall was not down to breakfast, and Hugh had taken leave of her the night before. The Colonel came out into the passage. Flossie wished he would have stayed away. She wanted to be alone with Hugh this last moment. Oh, how many things there were which she might have said, and had not said to him, and now it was too late! She could think of nothing steadily. Only one minute remaining. Hugh was going! Hugh was going! How could she bear it? What was all the world to her in comparison?

"O Hugh! O Hugh!"

She held him convulsively, as he bent over her.

"My own darling," he said, with quivering lips·

my own precious Flossie! God be with you - keep you——"

"O Hugh! I can't——"

"He will help you," whispered Hugh brokenly, pale as ashes himself. "*He* will never leave you Be His little handmaid, darling. Jesus will comfort you. My own—I must not stay."

"O Hugh,—Hugh!"

Nothing else would come to her lips, but that broken-hearted bitter cry. A moment more Hugh strained her closely in his arms.

"Good-bye, my Flossie—precious—my own little darling—good-bye. God bless you!"

He gently released himself from her clinging grasp. She let him do it, only putting up her face for one more kiss.

"To the station; and drive quickly, if you please."

He stepped into the carriage as he spoke, leaning forward for a last look. A moment more, and he was gone.

Pityingly the Colonel approached the poor lonely little sister; but she turned hastily away, with a low faint sobbing cry, and fled—whither he could not tell. Nurse was crying bitterly close at hand, unseen by Flossie, though not forgotten by Hugh at the moment of departure. Colonel Marshall asked anxiously, "What shall we do about the poor child?"

"Please, sir, 'tis best to leave her awhile. There's nothing to be done. It's Miss Flossie's way to go alone; and she wouldn't let even me come near her yet, I know."

Colonel Marshall stood silently for a moment, and then went back into the breakfast-room, where his five children were busily engaged with bread and butter and new-laid eggs.

"Has Mr. Silverthorn gone, Papa?" asked Chenda, who had been raised to the dignity of tea-maker in her mother's absence.

"Yes, just gone."

"I like Mr. Silverthorn," remarked Elsie. "O Papa, won't you let us see the big dog, Fido, after breakfast?"

Colonel Marshall was absorbed in thought, and made no answer.

"Mr. Silverthorn's dog, wasn't he?" said Vernon; "and Papa's now, I suppose?"

"What kind of dog is he?" asked Chenda, "Edric, you saw him yesterday. Didn't Vernon?"

"No; he was locked up somewhere," said Vernon. "Edric says he's a beauty."

"What like?" inquired Elsie.

"Brown—a sort of big retriever—brown, and glossy as velvet," said Edric. "Poor fellow, he looked so melancholy; I could have fancied he knew his master was going away."

"Mr. Silverthorn didn't take him out shooting,

did he?" said Vernon. "I asked him, and he said something about that not being very much in his line. I should like to try my hand at it, though.'

"At what?" asked the Colonel.

"Shooting, Papa."

"Oh!" and Colonel Marshall laughed slightly in his dry way. "There are a few other more important matters to be learnt first, my boy. Come, have you all finished breakfast? Mind you don't get into mischief."

"*I* don't mean to do anything of the sort," said Vernon, as the door closed behind his father. "I just mean to go on an exploring tour, and see what there is to be seen."

"In the house or out?" asked Elsie.

"Out. I'll have a peep at the dog."

"No chance of that," said Edric. "They say, if he were let out, he would be after the fly like a flash, and never stop till he reached the station. He is to be kept chained up for three or four days, and none of us are to go near him till Papa gives leave. Have you girls seen all over the house yet?"

"Nearly," said Chenda. "It is only the library and Flossie's room, where we were told not to go yesterday. Edric, do you suppose Mamma will keep all the rooms just as they are now?"

"I'm sure I don't know. What's wrong with them?"

"I didn't say anything was wrong. But I do

think it will seem rather queer, if Flossie keeps on in her bedroom, and Elsie and I are in the one where we were put the last two nights. It is hardly a bit bigger than Flossie's, and not one quarter so nicely furnished. Flossie's room is perfectly lovely."

"You don't mean to say you want to turn that poor child out of her room?"

"She has no right to it," said Chenda. "I can't see that she has the very least right to it. I am the eldest, and the house is Papa's, and Flossie is only allowed to live here out of kindness. I think *I* ought properly to have that room, and Flossie ought to sleep with Elsie in the other."

"But I don't want to sleep with Flossie," said Elsie. "I have always had a room with you."

"Well, I think that would be the right way to arrange," said Chenda composedly. "I don't mean because I want to get the best for myself, but because I think it *ought* to be so. Flossie is younger than I am, and has no right to the best."

"It would be cruel work to make any such changes just after she has lost her brother," said Edric. "The room he has done up for her, and all the things in it seeming like presents from him—I wonder you can wish it."

"Things bought with Papa's money."

"If that is the way you are going to talk before Flossie, you will make her perfectly miserable,"

said Edric. "And I know Papa would be vexed, if he heard you."

Chenda rose and brought out her work-basket with an injured air. The two elder boys speedily vanished into the garden, and Elsie set off on a ramble through the house. Little Gerard went quietly to the drawing-room, to wait for his mother. But nobody saw anything of Flossie. She had hidden herself away in the farthest corner of the garrets, and wanted nothing but to be left there, alone with her great sorrow.

Nurse found her out with difficulty in the middle of the day, and cried with her for a while, which was the best sort of comfort she could have given. Flossie would take no dinner. She let Nurse bring her a cup of tea, but after drinking it she implored to be left alone again. Even Nurse's sympathy she could not bear. It was outside her. Nurse could not know the depth of her woe. Nurse could not touch her bitter pain. She only longed to be there, undisturbed in her dreariness, nursing her passionate grief.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TWILIGHT HOUR.

"ONE—two—three—four—five!"

The distant sound of the Church clock came up through the cracks and crannies of the old garret. And with a sudden start, as if from a violent shock, Flossie found herself upon her feet.

Five o'clock—the dear old hour—best of all the twenty-four! How Flossie had always loved it! What should she do to-day?

She could not stay away from the study. Habit was too strong to be resisted. She found herself going downstairs with trembling footsteps, dreading only to meet some one by the way. It never occurred to her that Colonel Marshall might be in the library,—might be in Hugh's place. She only knew that Hugh would not be there.

Nobody met her all the way down. She turned the handle, and went softly in, closing the door behind her.

No one was in the room. The fire was flickering with a sort of moody light, and the big chair

was drawn forward on the rug, as if in readiness for Hugh. Such a great wave of anguish swept over her heart at the sight, that it almost felt as if she must die beneath it. For a moment she sat down in the chair, as she had been wont to do,—but the terrible blank of no one beside her and no arm round her, was too much to be endured. A deep sob broke from her, and she flung herself on her knees, with her face buried in her crossed arms.

"O Hugh, I can't bear it—I can't! O Hugh, I don't know what to do. I can't live without you. O Hugh, it is so dreadful. If you would but come back just for one kiss,—just one! If you only would—O Hugh—do come—do come back! Hugh—Hugh——"

Her sobs were hushed as the deep stillness of the silent room pressed heavily upon her. She lifted her head, and gazed around her hopelessly.

"Hugh—Hugh, darling——"

No answer still, for Hugh was far away. He could not hear her voice.

"Hugh, if you were only here—Hugh—dear darling Hugh——"

The little white face grew whiter, and the eyes grew wide and dim, and Flossie sobbed hysterically for breath.

"O Hugh, I wish, I wish I could die. There's nobody left to love me. Hugh, darling! O Hugh, *won't* you answer?"

"Be His little handmaid, darling. JESUS will comfort you."

So strongly came the words to Flossie's heart, that she could almost have fancied it was Hugh's own voice speaking. She suddenly stopped panting, and a strange feeling of quiet awe crept over her.

Hugh was not in the room. But was Another there,—One whom Flossie could not see? Hugh could not hear her voice. But One was always listening. Was He waiting to comfort her? Did He want her to become His little handmaid? Perhaps He was standing gently by her side, till she should have left off calling vainly to her brother, and would turn to Him. Perhaps — but Flossie did not say "perhaps" to herself; she felt so sure.

The brown head went down again upon the two crossed arms, with a rush of sweet soft sorrowful tears. "Oh, do, do help me, please," sobbed Flossie. "O Lord Jesus, please forgive me, for Thy sake. I've been so wrong; but oh, it is so dreadful losing Hugh. I don't know how to bear it. I can't be brave. I don't seem to care for anything else. And I've nobody to talk to now. Please, please help me. I want to be Thy little handmaid. I want to do whatever Thou wilt tell me. I can't be Hugh's little handmaid any longer, and he can't hear when I speak, and I've nobody left. Oh, please comfort me, and help me, because I am *so* miserable, and I can't make myself Thy little handmaid.

though I do want to be. Please, oh, please—for Thine own sake."

Not once only, but many times, did such earnest childish words break from her in sobbing murmurs. The stillness of the room did not weigh upon her now. She was no longer speaking to one who could not hear. And gradually the tears ceased, and the weeping was hushed, and the little weary girl sank sound asleep as she knelt there.

Somebody holding her hand,—that was Flossie's first sensation when she began to awake. She thought dreamily that it was Hugh, and lay still, wondering what made her feel so weak and strange. But all at once there flashed into her mind a recollection of the past day. Hugh! why, Hugh was far away. And Flossie looked up with a slight start, to find herself lying on the study sofa, and Colonel Marshall quietly seated by her side.

He was reading, and Flossie shut her eyes again hastily. She wanted a moment for thought. What was she doing here? What was he doing? Gradually she remembered how she had knelt before Hugh's arm-chair, and wept and prayed; and how something of peace and comfort had come to her; and how she had felt so very, very tired.

"And then I must have gone to sleep," thought Flossie, "and he must have carried me here. I wonder I didn't wake. But it was very kind of him."

She gave one glance again at his grave face, and then looked towards the chair.

"I mustn't forget—about *that*. I'll ask it a great many more times. I do want so much to be the Lord Jesus Christ's little handmaid. And He will make me so. Hugh told me to ask Him—just as I've done. But I never felt like doing it before to-day. I wonder if—if He helped me this evening Hugh says we can't even pray unless He helps us by His Holy Spirit. I think I'll ask Him to help me a great deal with my prayers. And oh, I'll ask Him so often to take care of my own dear, dear Hugh!"

"Little Flossie——"

Flossie had forgotten to keep her eyes shut. Colonel Marshall put his book down, took her other hand also in his, and quietly kissed her forehead.

"Do you know what o'clock it is, you sleepy little woman?"

"No," said Flossie shyly.

"Just seven. The school-room tea was over half an hour ago."

"The school-room tea," said Flossie wonderingly.

"Ah! that is a new institution to you. You see, Mrs. Marshall is not strong, and can't stand too many children about her. Besides, she and I dine late, and the young ones dine early. But I am going to invite you to our late dinner this evening."

Flossie looked doubtful.

"The second bell will ring directly, so it is time we should make ourselves ready, is it not?" And, stepping to the door, Colonel Marshall called, "Elsie."

Not the little girl, but Mrs. Marshall, responded to the call, and came to the sofa. Flossie's eyes wandered in some surprise over her soft flowing evening dress and delicate shawl.

"Flossie is wide awake, and ready for dinner," said the Colonel, taking that fact for granted.

'I don't want to eat," said Flossie.

"No, only to come and look at us," said Colonel Marshall.

"What if we were to smooth out these tangled curls?" asked Mrs. Marshall. And Flossie found that she had brought a little brush with her for the purpose. The soft steady movements over her head were very pleasant, and almost made it ache less.

"Thank you," Flossie whispered. "It is so kind——"

"There goes the bell," said Colonel Marshall, and Flossie found herself standing on her feet, though not very steadily.

"Can you manage to walk, Flossie?"

"I don't know—I'll try," said Flossie, catching at the table for support. "My feet feel all like cotton-wool, and the floor goes up and down so."

"She is giddy, poor child," said Mrs. Marshall.

And the Colonel lifted her up in his arms, as if she had been a baby, and carried her straight off to the dining-room sofa.

"There, I think we must make a bit of an invalid of her to-night. And now for a delicate piece of chicken for a white-cheeked little girl."

It was of no use to protest against eating. Flossie found that she just had to do as she was told. It was very strange to lie there on the sofa, in her tumbled dusty dress, with that grave Colonel and that gentle sweet-faced lady both waiting on her. For they would not let the servants do anything for her. Flossie did wonder why, and then she settled that it must be because they wanted her to love them. "And I'll have to love them too," thought Flossie. "I don't see that I could help it, when they are so kind. It won't make me love darling Hugh less. And they couldn't take his place. Hugh knows they couldn't; but I shouldn't like any one else to think that they could."

"Flossie, you mustn't sigh," said the Colonel

Flossie looked up rather wonderingly. He had just come to her side to take away her plate, and he lifted up her face with one hand. She did not like him to see how full her eyes were of tears, but there was no help for it.

"You must not sigh, Flossie."

"Mustn't I?"

"No, because you will make Mrs. Marshall feel depressed. She is very tender-hearted, and if anybody else sighs she thinks she must sigh too."

"Don't mind him, Flossie. He is only laughing at you," said Mrs. Marshall.

Flossie thought it was a grave sort of laughter, and she looked very soberly from one to the other.

"Only if you *do* sigh, you must never go alone to do it, because that would be worst of all," said the Colonel. "I rather think the best plan would be to come and sigh sometimes in the study with me, Flossie — whenever you feel inclined, you know."

Flossie was rather mystified, and at a loss what to make of the Colonel. She was so interested in his curious dry way of talking, that she ate a very good dinner, almost without thinking about it. And then dessert was brought in, and all at once the five children made their appearance.

"Flossie! why, you don't say *you're* here!" cried Elsie.

Chenda did not like it at all. She held her head high, and felt injured. Who was this little Flossie Silverthorn, to be admitted to take dinner with her father and mother, while she—Chenda Marshall, eldest daughter of the house—was banished to the school-room tea? She did not venture, however, to make any remarks in her father's presence, and only ate her orange in somewhat annoyed silence.

And Flossie lay, and listened, and smiled, as the Colonel told a whole string of amusing Indian stories to his younger children. Little Gerard, as usual, clung to his mother, but the others asked questions and talked eagerly, till even Chenda forgot her displeasure, and was drawn in. It was quite a new peep into family life for Flossie.

CHAPTER IX.

RICHENDA'S RIGHTS.

"MAMMA," said Chenda, one afternoon, two or three days later. She had brought her work into the drawing-room, and was sitting there alone with Mrs. Marshall.

"Well, dear?"

"Mamma, do you mean Flossie always to keep that bedroom, and always to dine with you and Papa—at least, to have her tea with you when you dine,—and always to be able to do whatever she likes?"

"Always to do what she likes," repeated Mrs. Marshall, looking amused. "Why, no, Chenda, certainly not, if she wishes to do anything wrong."

"But then——"

"Or if she wishes to do anything which I would not allow to my own children. I intend to make no difference whatever between you three little girls."

"But, Mamma, I am the eldest, and Flossie has had dinner with you."

"That will not go on. I thought it best for the first few days. Miss Wilmot will arrive on Friday evening."

"The new governess?"

"Yes, and then I intend Flossie to take her right place in the school-room."

"And I suppose Elsie and I shall have our proper share of the bookshelves and cupboards and drawers, Mamma. Flossie's things are everywhere now."

"Certainly you will Only it would not have been kind to press these changes upon the poor child in her first distress. She is certainly beginning now to feel more at home with your Papa and me."

"I am sure she *ought* to be grateful."

"What for, Chenda?"

"Why,—for all you are doing for her."

"Poor little girl!"

"Mamma, I wanted to ask you——"

"Well, dear?" For Chenda came to another stop.

"I don't know whether you'll be angry."

"My dear Chenda, have I ever given you the least reason for expecting anything of the sort?"

"Oh, you know, Mamma—we always talked like that at school. I don't mean *angry* exactly—but——"

"Only displeased. No, you may ask what you

like. I want you very much, darling Chenda, to feel you may be perfectly open with me, and say anything that comes into your head.

"Yes."

The quiet matter-of-fact tone was a little chilling.

"Then you won't mind my asking," Chenda went on, after a little pause. "Mamma, do all those things really belong to Flossie?"

"All what things?"

"Why, I can't tell you all. Things of all sorts that her brother has given her. Books and boxes, and toys, and ornaments,—she has heaps all over the house. Mr. Silverthorn was always giving her presents. Are they all rightly hers?"

"Certainly they are. My dear, what do you mean? If a present is given to you, don't you count it your own?"

"Yes—of course. But then—you see—you know —Mamma—the house and Mr. Silverthorn's money do belong to Papa,—and I didn't know——"

"You thought Flossie's things might come to you. Certainly not. Whatever her brother has given her is absolutely her own. You could not wish it otherwise, I am sure."

No answer. Mrs. Marshall looked a little disappointed.

"And then, there is about the bedroom?"

"What bedroom? I do not understand."

"Flossie's, Mamma. Is she going to keep it always?"

"I have no present intention of making any change. Why?"

"It's the best room; and she isn't the eldest."

"How is it the best? Your room is decidedly larger."

"But then two of us sleep together in it. Wouldn't it be a better plan if I had Flossie's room, and Flossie were to sleep with Elsie?"

"I would not deprive Flossie of her room on any account."

"Mamma, I don't think you know how nicely furnished it is—how *much* better than ours. She has a most lovely little rocking-chair, which Mr. Silverthorn gave her on her last birthday."

"Then she has a perfect right to that."

"But he gave her a book at the same time And then, she has pictures all over the walls—real beauties, all framed. Mr. Silverthorn was always trying to make it look prettier. You don't know how bare my room seems in comparison."

"You must trust Papa and me to make it look prettier for you soon."

"Yes, of course — but won't it seem rather queer?"

"Won't what?"

"Why, that Flossie should have the best room,—better than I. Because *I* am Miss Marshall, and

Flossie is only allowed to live here out of kindness. Won't people think it rather funny?"

"What people?"

"Anybody; it doesn't matter who."

"I think it does matter very much. This is a question which concerns very few in the world beside ourselves. What others' opinion may happen to be is of no importance whatever."

"Only one doesn't like to do things which seem strange."

"So long as we do the *right* things, never mind whether they seem strange or no."

"Then you do mean Flossie to sleep there always?"

"Always is a strong word. As I told you, I have no present intention of making any change."

Chenda said no more; neither would she be drawn into any further conversation. It was her peculiar way of showing vexation. Her smooth brow did not pucker, or her lips pout, like Elsie's at times; but she sat stiffly upright, and worked hard at her silk pincushion, and refused to speak beyond the shortest possible answers to her mother's questions. Mrs. Marshall sighed quietly once or twice, but said no more.

A sound of many voices in the hall presently drew Chenda thither. Colonel Marshall had just come in, leading a beautiful dog by the collar;

and Edric and Vernon and Elsie were clustering eagerly round him.

"Mr. Silverthorn's dog! O what a lovely creature!" cried Chenda. "But he is yours now, Papa."

"I am afraid he does not recognize his new relationship. He seems to have no notion whatever of obeying me. Down—down, good fellow! Down, Fido!"

Fido had not the least intention of going "down," or of remaining where he was. He stood quiet for a minute, as if to put the Colonel off his guard, and then with a bound broke free, and rushed away.

"He'll startle Mamma. Take care. Is the drawing-room door shut?" cried the Colonel.

No; Chenda had left it wide open. In went Fido with a spring; but he did not remain there. One eager scamper round the room, with searching eyes and uplifted twitching nostrils, and he was scouring along the passage in another direction. It was perfectly hopeless to dream of catching him yet. Vernon once hemmed him in a corner, and bent down to grasp his collar, but Fido leaped clean over him. Colonel Marshall and the boys chased him for some distance; but came to a stop at length, laughing and panting. Not a door stood open that he did not enter; but he remained nowhere long.

"Papa, what is he doing?" asked Elsie.

"Looking for his master."

Poor fellow! They could laugh at him at first, when he began his eager hopeful chase. It was a different matter when they saw the splendid feathery brown tail begin to droop, and the brown eyes to look wistful and sad. Once he stopped, and lifted his nose in the air with a long low mournful howl. Edric would have stepped forward to secure him; but a sudden display of white teeth, and a soft growl, warned him that it was best to be cautious.

"Take care, Edric; there is more mischief in the dog than I thought. He can't have been properly trained."

But at that moment Flossie appeared on the scene, and ran fearlessly towards him.

"Fido! O I thought I heard him. O Fido—dear old Fido!"

The poor creature's frantic delight was touching to see. "He will hurt the child," exclaimed Colonel Marshall, starting forward in alarm. But at one gentle, "Down, Fido," from his little mistress, he sank crouching at her feet, holding them tightly between his two massive white paws, and looking up at her with a pair of almost human eyes. Flossie went down likewise, and buried her face in the rich velvet coat.

"He does what Flossie tells him, doesn't he, Papa?" said Elsie.

"Hugh taught him," said Flossie, lifting a tearful

face. "He always made Fido obey him and me; and Fido never cares at all for what anybody else says."

"He will have to learn," said Colonel Marshall. "It will be necessary that he should obey me too. You must help me to make him understand, Flossie. I should be sorry to have to punish him."

"Oh, no—please——"

Flossie shook with sobs at the bare idea, and Fido tried to lick her face, and then gave vent to his feelings in a low moan.

"Shall I take him out in the yard again?" asked the Colonel.

"May I just take him to the study first?" sobbed Flossie. "I want him to know that Hugh is gone, and then he won't be always looking out for him.

Wondering what she would do, the Colonel consented, and they all followed. Flossie stifled down her sobs, and dashed away her tears, as she walked downstairs, with Fido close to her heels. She went straight into the study. Fido had rushed in there before, and out again, in his vain search. Now she led him quietly to the arm-chair, and pointing to it, said sadly and distinctly,—

"Fido, he's gone."

Fido's tail drooped, and the brown eyes watched her wistfully.

"He has gone, Fido,—gone—quite gone. No master now. Fido, he has gone!"

Did the dog verily understand, as his little mistress thought he did? It was the way she had always made known to him an unusual absence of Hugh's. He walked round the table, sniffed at the desk,—came back—looked mournfully once again into Flossie's face,—laid his head down on the arm of the chair, with the splendid silken brown ears drooping on either side,—and heaved a sorrowful sigh, as dogs do sigh.

"O Fido, Fido, he has gone—quite gone! O Fido, darling doggie!"

Flossie cried excessively, almost more than she had yet cried since Hugh went away. Fido's silent wordless grief nearly broke her little heart with its added weight of pain. She did not feel just then as if she *could* bear her trouble. She did not see that the children and their father had all left the room. But she felt a gentle hand lift her up presently.

"Flossie darling, you must not go on so," said Mrs. Marshall. "Listen, dearest, Colonel Marshall is going to tell you a piece of good news."

Flossie raised her face wofully. What good news could there be for her?"

"I can't stand these oceans of tears, Flossie," said the Colonel. "And somehow, I fancy it will be very hard to make Fido willing to take me for a master. Don't you think some better arrangement would be possible?"

"I don't know. Oh, I wish—I wish——"

"Wish what? asked the Colonel, taking Flossie on his knee, while Mrs. Marshall's hand gently stroked her hair. "Wish Fido could be yours?"

"If he could be Hugh's, and I could take care of him for Hugh," said Flossie sadly. "But he can't. Hugh said he was worth a *great* deal,—and I couldn't buy him—even if——"

"Even if I would sell him. No, I would not. But I will do something else, Flossie. I will give him to you."

"Me!" said Flossie, trembling.

"Yes, to you, for your very own. When Hugh comes back, you may give Fido back to him, if you wish. At present he is yours. As for payment,—all we ask is a corner of little Flossie's heart."

And Flossie's broken rapturous thanks seemed to give promise that such payment would not be wanting.

CHAPTER X.

FLOSSIE FINDS A LITTLE FRIEND.

FRIDAY arrived, and with it the new governess, Miss Wilmot. It was a trying day for poor Flossie. *Last* Friday she had had Hugh with her, for he had not left till the Saturday morning; and bitter as that Friday had been, it was worse to be without him. Then it was a very rainy day, and her one great comfort of solitary rambling about the garden, with only Fido for her companion, was denied her. The very thought of his loneliness made her own worse. Also it was the first day of her regularly taking her place at the schoolroom tea. Flossie had known it must be so, but that did not make her to dread it less. Perhaps the change might have been put off one more day, but that evening Mr. and Mrs. Knight came in to late dinner, and Willa took tea in the schoolroom. So it could hardly be avoided.

Miss Wilmot was a gentle fair-haired young-looking lady, seeming rather more disposed to be silent than to talk, and somewhat shy among so

many strange children. Flossie felt quite sorry for her, when Chenda and Elsie put their heads together, and whispered and giggled. She was sure they were making some remark about Miss Wilmot, and she was sure Miss Wilmot knew it too, by the way she flushed up.

"This is Flossie's first tea here," Chenda observed, drawing attention to the very fact which Flossie least wanted to hear talked about; for too much of sorrow lay below it. "She has had tea at Papa and Mamma's dinner every evening.

"Did you like that best, Flossie?" asked Willa. "*I* shouldn't. Uncle Norman frightens me."

"Papa doesn't frighten *me*," said Elsie. "Why, Willa,—he's as kind as kind can be. And do you know, Mamma isn't at all like what I had fancied she would be."

"I like the way Mamma dresses," said Chenda. "She has such beautiful Indian silks, do you know, Miss Wilmot. But I don't think she ever cares a scrap what she has on. It was Papa who bought them for her."

"And her Delhi brooch," said Elsie. "Oh! and, Willa, she has brought us some gold bangles, do you know. And there are other things too, only the boxes haven't been nearly all unpacked."

"No, and we have no room to put things away, till we have settled about the shelves and cupboards," said Chenda, glancing about the spacious

well-furnished schoolroom, with its bow and French windows. "We must do that to-morrow."

"There are places enough here for the stowage of a man-of-war," said Vernon. "You girls won't need to fight on that score."

"Nobody thinks of fighting, but I mean to have room enough to keep my things neatly," said Chenda, with one of her side-glances at Flossie, which Flossie was beginning to understand and distressfully to feel.

"I didn't know, Chenda,—I'll take care—I'll move my things to-morrow," said Flossie hurriedly. "I never thought——"

"Why, you didn't suppose, did you, that you could have the whole schoolroom to yourself?"

Chenda's tone was not kind, and Flossie found it hard to answer gently, "No,—I didn't think about it."

"I shall want that wide shelf in the cupboard for my school-books," said Chenda; "and part of the bookcase for my other books, and some of the drawers, and part of the cheffonier."

"Anything more?" asked Edric drily.

"I don't know where I can put my books," said Flossie. "But I'll do what Mrs. Marshall wants."

Chenda opened her eyes. "I should just think you would. Why, Flossie!"

"What?" asked Flossie.

"I never heard of such a thing. Of *course* you'll do what Mamma tells you."

Flossie looked perplexed. "Why, I said I would."

"Yes: but in that way—as if you needn't unless you liked. You seem to forget it's *our* house now, and Elsie and I have the first right to everything here."

"How you do go on, Chenda!" muttered Edric.

For a moment Flossie's cheeks grew perfectly crimson—not with hurt feeling alone, but with downright anger. Little Gerard looked wistfully at her across the table, and Miss Wilmot's face wore a very grave expression. But the anger did not last. "HIS little handmaid—I must not be cross. O Lord Jesus, please help me," breathed Flossie in her heart, and the prayer brought a quick answer. She grew very quiet and gentle.

"Chenda, you don't understand. I did not mean that at all. I only meant that I would not mind—would not grumble."

"I don't see what right you have to mind or to grumble either. You ought to be very glad that you can stay on in the house at all."

"Chenda, I do not like to begin fault-finding so soon, but I am very sure that Mrs. Marshall would not approve of this sort of conversation," interposed Miss Wilmot unexpectedly.

"Flossie is perfectly absurd, Miss Wilmot. She

seems to think that because she has lived here so long, the house belongs to her, and she can have everything her own way. She has to learn that she can't be first here any longer."

Flossie's cheeks burnt furiously. "I don't want to be first. I didn't think of such a thing," she began, and then she stopped.

"Well, you behave like it, at all events," said Chenda.

Miss Wilmot was in difficulties. A stranger to all the children, and not knowing how far any of them might go, she was very anxious to avoid beginning her schoolroom reign with a struggle. Also Chenda's cool confident and almost lady-like way of saying really rude things made it the more difficult to take hold of them. For once Edric exerted himself to come to the rescue.

"Chenda, if you say another word of that sort, Mamma shall hear all about it."

"I thought boys never told tales," said Chenda, maintaining her coolness not very easily.

"Tales or no tales, Flossie shan't be made miserable."

"I can't think what you're all making such a fuss about," broke in Willa. "Flossie and I never used to quarrel before you came, Chenda, and I don't see why you and Flossie need quarrel now Can't we have some game after tea, before we go into the drawing-room?"

This set them off upon a new tack, and Flossie was left alone. She could not recover her composure sufficiently to make another remark, but slipped away the moment tea was over, and escaped to the library. It was sure to be unoccupied now, for Colonel Marshall was at dinner. Flossie curled herself up in the arm-chair, and leant back to think. Tears naturally followed soon upon thought, but all at once something cold touched her hand, and she raised her head.

"It's only I, Flossie."

"Gerard!"

She was surprised to find the little pale-faced, blue-lipped, dark-eyed boy beside her. He was the one whom she had noticed least of all the children hitherto—from his habit, doubtless, of slipping away into quiet corners.

"What do you want, Gerard?"

"Flossie, are you crying?"

The large black eyes were looking at her wistfully and steadily. It was a sweet little gentle face, though oftentimes fretful with pain. Now, as he stood gazing pityingly upon Flossie, it was not fretful, but almost lovely.

"Flossie, you mustn't cry, please, because it makes Mamma sorry."

Flossie raised herself a little, and made Gerard sit down beside her, but she did not speak.

"Was it what Chenda said?" asked Gerard

softly. "Flossie, do you like Chenda? I don't. She isn't very kind to me. I don't like her at all."

"I suppose I ought to like her," said Flossie. "O Gerard, it's very hard to love everybody."

"*I* don't love everybody," said Gerard. "I don't love some people at all. But I love you, Flossie, because you're not happy."

"Do you love everybody that isn't happy, Gerard?"

"I think so," said Gerard thoughtfully. "Yes, I can't help loving them, because, you see, I think they're a little like me."

"You! why, Gerard, *you* ought to be happy."

Gerard shook his head, in his old quiet way, so far beyond his years.

"Why aren't you? You have your Mamma and everybody?"

"I'm always tired. And Mamma has so much to do now—not like when we were in India. And I do wish I was the same as other boys."

"Not like Vernon," said Flossie. "He is so rough and teasing. You are much nicer as you are."

Gerard's eyes grew wistful. "Do you think me nice?" he said. "Chenda and Elsie don't. They said I was so stupid. But it hurts me to do things."

"You're not stupid; you're as nice as can be. Gerard, they don't like me either, but you and I'll love one another, won't we?"

Flossie brightened up, and spoke warmly under this new interest. She loved to feel the little languid boy leaning against her, just as she had been wont to lean against Hugh.

"And I'll take care of you, Gerard, when Mrs. Marshall is busy. Would you like that? Is this nice and resting—is it?"

A little murmur of comfortable assent was the answer.

"What makes it hurt you to do things?" asked Flossie all at once.

"It does," said Gerard. "Everything hurts. I'm *so* tired."

"But can't you have a doctor?"

"It's no good," said Gerard. "Flossie, do you really think me nice?"

"Nicest of them all," said Flossie, thinking of the family generally.

"And you're going to love me?"

"Ever so much."

"Yes, only it won't be so much as Mamma does," said Gerard. "It couldn't be so much, could it? Because I want to tell you something, and if you loved me like Mamma does, I wouldn't say it. It would make you too sorry. But if you only love me—not like Chenda and not like Mamma, but just between—then I'll tell you."

"I do love you—just between."

"Then I think I'll tell you," said Gerard, "I

think I will, because I've wanted ever so long to say it to somebody, and I used to think I would to Chenda, but Chenda isn't like what I fancied her. Flossie, it's quite a secret. Flossie,—do you know, —I'll never be a man." A little sobbing catch in the breath told of childish grief in the thought.

"Never be a man!" repeated Flossie. "Why, Gerard, what can you mean?"

"I'll never be a man," said Gerard mournfully, "because the doctor said so, and he didn't think I heard; but I wasn't really asleep. It was a long while ago. But I did hear him."

"You'll be a man if you live to grow up."

"Ah, but he said I wouldn't, Flossie. And I think—I think—don't you think he must have meant that I would have to die? Flossie, do you think you would be afraid to die?"

"I don't know," said Flossie very softly. "Not if I felt the Lord Jesus quite close by me, Gerard; because I should be so safe in His Arms."

"He doesn't come close to me," said Gerard. "I wish I had lived ever so long ago, Flossie, and Mamma had brought me and put me in His arms, like the children then. I think He would have stopped the tiredness, wouldn't He?"

"Hugh says it's better now; because they could only be in His arms a little while, and we may be always—always there, Gerard."

"I wish I could," said Gerard. "Mamma often says He loves me, Flossie, but it doesn't feel like it."

"Doesn't it?" said Flossie. "Why, Gerard, I think it feels ever so much like it. Just think of what He did for us."

"What?"

"Why, Gerard,—when He died on the Cross."

"But that was ever so long ago."

"But He loves the same now,—just every bit as much. The Lord Jesus can't change, you know. And I think, if you ask Him, that He'll show you His love."

"I'd like you to tell me about all that you know," said Gerard softly.

"So I will," said Flossie. "There's somebody coming now; but we'll have another talk, and I'll tell you a secret, Gerard, that nobody in all the world knows except Hugh."

"I like secrets," said Gerard, greatly pleased. And then the door burst open, and Vernon shouted,—

"I say, you two, what are you after? It's time to go to the drawing-room."

But Flossie found a moment to slip away upstairs, for the purpose of smoothing her ruffled hair. And then she stood gazing out of the window, with tears in her eyes, and such a happy thought in her heart.

"Hugh said that if I was the Master's little handmaid, He would send me on His errands; and let me comfort people for Him sometimes. I wonder, oh, I wonder, if it was that just now. Did He want me to comfort poor little Gerard? Was it *He* that put it into my head? I think—I do think—oh, it does make me so glad!" murmured Flossie.

CHAPTER XI.

LITTLE SERVANTS.

"FLOSSIE, where are you going?"

"Upstairs,—up in the garrets."

"Mayn't I come with you?"

Flossie felt a little provoked. It was Sunday afternoon, and she had meant to go alone for a nice quiet read. Last Sunday she had been too poorly for anything but lying on the sofa; to-day she wanted to pass the Sunday just as Hugh would like it passed—yes, and as her MASTER would be pleased to see. Flossie's vexation suddenly died down. What if this were only another little piece of work for Him? How could she tell?

"Yes, come with me."

"May I? Won't you mind? Mamma is lying down, because going to Church tires her so; and they're all talking and laughing in the schoolroom, except Edric, and Miss Wilmot can't stop them. Flossie, may I come? And will you tell me the secret?"

"Yes," said Flossie soberly, though she did not

feel quite so much inclined now to speak openly as she had done before.

She took his hand, and went up the back stairs with him—slowly, to suit his movements. She was thinking all the way, and did not notice him till they reached the top, when she felt him leaning hard upon her.

"Gerard! why, Gerard!"

Flossie was terrified. She had never seen anything like his face—so grey and dark—and his breath seemed absolutely gone. She would have rushed away, but his fingers were clutching her tightly.

"Gerard, what *is* the matter? What shall I do? O Gerard, let me call Nurse. Gerard, don't hold me,—don't——"

But he would not let her move, and she dared not use strong force. In her alarm she almost thought he was going to die there, while she was alone with him; but a faint gasp told of returning breath, and then he clung to her dress, panting heavily.

"Gerard, what *is* the matter?"

"The stairs—I'm better—now," said Gerard, with difficulty.

"The stairs! But why?"

"I don't know. I can't breathe—going up——"

"I'll take you down to Nurse."

"Oh, no! I'm better now. I want your secret."

Flossie was very doubtful what to do, but he took her hand, and tried to pull her towards some boxes. "Come, I want to sit down."

"My pet corner is farther away," said Flossie, relieved to see his face look natural again. "Won't it tire you to go there?"

"Oh, no! this isn't going up."

They found their way to the special nook which Flossie patronized—close to a garret window, with a view of the country reaching to a great distance. Nurse had put a tiny low bench there for Flossie, and the two children sat side by side.

"You're all right, now, Gerard?"

"Yes," said Gerard, absently. "Flossie, do you love me still?"

"Of course I do. Why, you don't think I'd leave off so soon?"

"I thought you didn't want me up here."

"Yes, but I do now."

And then they sat quiet for a minute.

"I'm going to hear your secret," said Gerard.

'Yes," said Flossie, wishing she had not made the promise; "I said so, but I don't know how to tell you, somehow."

"Tell it out straight, Flossie."

"I don't seem as if I could."

"What is it about?" asked Gerard.

"Like what we were talking of yesterday," said Flossie. "Gerard, I haven't ever said such a thing

to anybody except Hugh: but if you really want—very much——"

"Please," said Gerard. "Is it a great grand secret, Flossie?"

"No—yes—no; it won't seem so to you," said Flossie. "It's only, Gerard—only—only—I'm trying to be the Lord Jesus Christ's little handmaid."

Gerard looked earnestly up in her face. "Handmaid!" he repeated.

"Yes: Hugh says that means 'a little maid that waits at hand.' I'm trying to be that, you know."

"I didn't know you were a maid," said Gerard presently.

"I've always been Hugh's little maid," said Flossie, with springing tears. "And now I'm trying to be the—the *other*."

"But I don't see how. Flossie, do tell me," said Gerard, with a nervous movement of his little clasped fingers. "Do tell me, Flossie."

"Why, I told you," said Flossie. "I'm trying to be that,—*His* little handmaid."

"Whose?"

"Why, Gerard, can't you understand? The Lord Jesus Christ's;" and Flossie's voice dropped reverently.

"He's away in heaven. You can't," said Gerard. "He's right ever so far away."

"He is down here too, though," said Flossie gravely. "Don't you know that, Gerard? He's always everywhere. Didn't Mrs. Marshall ever tell you?"

"Mamma's grown up," said Gerard quietly. "Yes, I know grown-up people are good—aren't they, Flossie? And Mamma is beautiful. I think there never was anybody so beautiful as Mamma."

"Hugh is," said Flossie jealously. "Hugh is the very best brother that ever lived."

"And Mamma is the best mamma," said Gerard. "I'd rather have my Mamma than your Hugh."

"And I'd rather have Hugh,—a hundred thousand times."

Flossie was going to say more, but she suddenly stopped. Was this the sort of comforting message which it might be she had to carry to little Gerard?

"I love your Mamma too, though," she said, after a little pause. "And I do think she is beautiful. And you mustn't mind my loving Hugh *most*, Gerard dear, because I couldn't help it, you know."

"No, I won't mind," Gerard answered. "Flossie, you haven't told me yet about your being a maid."

"A handmaid," said Flossie. "Why, it just means, Gerard, that I've given myself to the Lord Jesus, to be His little maid, and to do whatever He tells me."

"Tells you!"

"Yes. Hugh said I would have to listen hard, or I shouldn't always hear. And he said that the Lord Jesus would be my Master, and would give me little things to do for Him, and would take care of me."

"I can't be a handmaid, because I'm a boy," said Gerard sadly. "I wish I could."

"But couldn't you be a little servant?" asked Flossie. "Wouldn't you like that, Gerard? A little servant to run about on errands, and always be trying to please Him, because, you know, He died to take us to heaven."

Gerard looked doubtful. "I'm so tired, Flossie; I can't run."

"Maybe He would make you better before He told you to run," said Flossie, slowly following out some of her brother's thoughts, and little thinking what deep wisdom lay in these simple words which she was uttering. "I'd try, Gerard, if I were you. Don't you know how He used to make people well that came to Him?"

"He doesn't now."

"Not all in a moment," said Flossie; "but perhaps—by-and-by——"

"No: the doctor said I'd never be a man," said little Gerard mournfully. "Flossie, wouldn't I be afraid to die, if I was a little servant?"

"No," said Flossie, "I don't think so; not if you were to belong to the Lord Jesus."

"But maybe, I couldn't run about hard enough for Him," said Gerard. "I'm always so tired."

"It doesn't matter if you don't run at all," said Flossie. "Hugh talked all about that to me one day. Oh! I do wish he was here."

"Flossie, do tell me."

"I don't know how. I wish I could. Why, Gerard, people don't go to heaven because they *do* good things. They only go because Jesus died for them. He just washes them clean, if they ask Him, and takes them there. Only,—you know,—Hugh said——"

Flossie came to a pause, but Gerard's eyes watched eagerly for more.

"And then,—Hugh asked if I didn't love him,—and how I showed it——"

"Loved whom?"

"Him—Hugh. And he said that if I loved him I must be always trying to please him. So I did. I'd do anything in the world to please Hugh. And he said that if we knew the Lord Jesus we couldn't help loving Him; and then we must show we love Him, by just trying to please Him."

"Is that being a little servant?"

"Yes, if you tell Him you want to be, and give yourself right up to Him."

"And won't He tell me to run about a great deal?"

"Why, Gerard, no—not if you're tired. I think

He's a great deal more likely to take you right up in His arms and carry you. He's *ever* so gentle," said Flossie, in a low voice; and Gerard's eyes filled suddenly with tears.

"O Flossie, I wish He would!"

And then the little boy and girl sat silent again for some seconds, till a step came near.

"Miss Flossie—my dear—you don't mean to say you have brought Master Gerard up here!"

"He wanted to come, Nurse," said Flossie. "And Gerard and I do like to be together."

"Maybe, my dear. But you mustn't do it again. He isn't fit for them stairs, not without I was to lift him up."

"Won't you sometimes, Nursie?"

"I'll see," said Nurse, shaking her head. "Come, we'll take him downstairs at once, Miss Flossie, for his Mamma wants him."

And Flossie found that considerable commotion and alarm had been excited in the household by Gerard's unwonted absence, no one knowing where he was gone. Flossie was not found fault with in words, but she felt uncomfortably sure that Mrs. Marshall blamed her, and to give a full explanation was impossible. She could not tell what they had been talking about, and tears threatened to accompany any manner of self-defence. So very little was said on either hand, but the day ended somewhat sadly to Flossie.

CHAPTER XII.

CUPBOARDS AND SHELVES.

MONDAY morning witnessed a scene of dire confusion in the schoolroom.

It was a lovely day, and Flossie's first move after breakfast was to rush away for a game with Fido. She had always been wont to do it of old, before settling down to lessons with Miss Brice, and it never occurred to her that she was not free to follow her will now as then.

So for about half an hour she kissed and petted Fido to her heart's content, and ran races with him along the garden path, and felt herself almost like the merry little Flossie Silverthorn of a month back. And then, as her habit was, she led him into the yard, and chained him up, and went back to the schoolroom; for she knew that arrangements were now to be made for beginning lessons as speedily as possible.

Opening the schoolroom door, she stopped short and stood aghast. The others had not been idle in her absence. Piles of Flossie's books and treasures

lay upon the carpet, and piles of Chenda's and Elsie's books and treasures lay upon the table, ready to take their places in the almost emptied shelves and cupboards. Miss Wilmot stood overlooking, while Chenda stepped about daintily, yet busily, and Vernon and Elsie were streaked with dust from head to foot.

"Where have you been, Flossie?" asked Miss Wilmot.

"Only to see Fido, Miss Wilmot."

"You should have asked my leave first. I can allow no running away from the schoolroom without permission; and certainly not at this time in the day."

Flossie was startled into exclaiming, "But, Miss Wilmot, I always do. I *always* go to see Fido after breakfast. He would be miserable if I didn't."

"My dear, I cannot have lessons cut short for the sake of a dog's imaginary feelings."

Flossie coloured furiously. "Hugh always let me. Hugh always said——"

"Hush! I don't want any answers. You must learn to do as you are told, Flossie, without questioning. Chenda, where are you taking those books?"

Chenda dropped an armful upon a pile in the corner. "They are Flossie's, Miss Wilmot. I must make room for Elsie's and mine."

"Where will you put all these things of yours, Flossie?"

"I don't know. I've got nowhere to put them."

Miss Wilmot had spoken kindly, and Flossie knew that she was very wrong to answer in that sullen tone, but she felt thoroughly aggrieved and out of sorts. It was very hard to be debarred from her morning game with Fido; very hard to have all her possessions turned out of their places in this fashion; very hard to be expected to take it good-temperedly. "And I can't do it either," thought Flossie. "Nobody would. Chenda is so very unfair. She is taking the very best of everything to herself."

"They must go somewhere, Flossie," said Miss Wilmot, rather coldly. "You had better think it over and decide."

Flossie stood with her elbow on a corner of the cheffonier, and her cheek on her hand, never offering to help. She only looked moodily at her piles of goods, and made up her mind to consider herself very much ill-used. While all the rest were busy, she remained idle, and for a time nobody took any notice of her. Edric and Gerard were both with Mrs. Marshall. The other three dislodged Flossie's possessions unsparingly, and her resentment grew more and more bitter, though for a while pride kept her silent.

"Flossie, I can't have these things left here all day," said Miss Wilmot at length; for the morning

was passing away, and Flossie showed no signs of moving.

"I have nowhere to put them."

"They will have to go somewhere. If you cannot arrange them yourself, they had better be packed away in boxes in the garrets."

'Chenda has left me no room at all. She has taken everything for herself."

"I have taken three shelves of the large book-case, and two of the small one," said Chenda composedly. "That is quite fair, for I am the eldest. There are two shelves in the large for you, and two for Elsie, and one and a half for each of you in the small. And the boys must have the left-hand cupboard for their things, and the other cupboard must be for our lesson-books. Of course it has to be divided between us. You can't keep all to yourself. You had better choose what you want most to keep here, and have the rest upstairs in your room."

"I can't. My room is full," said Flossie, by no means soothed. "And I want all these things down here."

"You can't have them, so don't be ridiculous. Where do you suppose Elsie and I are going to keep our things, I should like to know? You seem to forget that on Friday you promised to make room for us next day."

"I could'nt——"

"No, because Mamma said we were not to begin making a mess before Sunday. But to-day you can, and you must."

But for the last three words, Flossie might have begun to yield. Instead of that she grew harder.

"I don't care. You have no right to turn everything of mine out like that, without asking me."

"No right!" Chenda put up her head scornfully, while Miss Wilmot, after a moment's hesitation, quietly left the room. "No right! Why, Flossie! This is Papa's house now. You have nothing to do with it. He only takes you in at all out of charity. It is *you* who have no right to anything here."

"I have, though!" said Flossie, with a choked sob and a sudden blaze of passion in her eyes. "It is Hugh's house rightly. I don't care what you say. I hate you, Chenda, and all of you. It *is* Hugh's house, and nobody has a right to turn him out; nobody in all the world. I hate you for going on so,—I do! I hate you all."

Even Chenda was startled at the storm she had raised. But the door opened quietly during the child's angry utterances, and a soft clear voice said,—

"Flossie!"

"Mamma, Flossie is in such a dreadful temper," said Elsie, who was watching the scene with wide-open eyes.

"Hush, Elsie. Chenda, what is the matter?"

"Really, Mamma, I had no idea Flossie would get into such a state," said Chenda, speaking with an injured air. "Of course, it is quite fair that Elsie and I should have our share of room to put away our things in. And Flossie is in a pet, because she can't keep all the shelves and cupboards to herself. She says we have no right to turn her out, and that she hates us all."

Flossie made no attempt at contradiction or self-defence. She stood perfectly still, looking no one in the face.

"Is this true, Flossie?"

No answer. Flossie looked stubborn. Mrs. Marshall's gentle face wore a very grieved expression.

"I do not know what you would wish done with all these things, Mrs. Marshall," said Miss Wilmot "Flossie refuses to put them away."

"I've nowhere to put them," said Flossie sullenly.

"You can ask the servants to remove them into the little lumber-room, Miss Wilmot, for the present, if you please. Flossie, I think you had better go upstairs to your own room. You may come to me in the drawing-room by-and-by, if you have anything to say."

Flossie walked away without a word. In the doorway she unexpectedly came upon Gerard, and for a moment their eyes met. Such a sorrowful

wondering little face it was that she saw. But Flossie said nothing. She only went straight upstairs to her own room, and shut the door, and sat down upon the floor.

The gust of passion was over, but deep steady displeasure towards Chenda had taken its place, and Flossie felt very very unhappy. She had reason to be so, she told herself. Chenda was so selfish, so unkind. Most of all had that word "charity" cut deeply down to the very quick of Flossie's pride. She could not shake it off, or get over it. She kept going back to it again and again, each time with a fresh thrill of burning anger. It *was* Hugh's house, she told herself. Colonel Marshall *had* no right to turn him out. She *did* hate them all—yes, every one of them.

Flossie rose suddenly with a resolute air, and brought her desk to the table. She would write to Hugh that very minute, and tell him all. And she would post the letter without anybody knowing. Hurriedly she opened the lid, and took out a sheet of paper and a pen, and began to trace with trembling fingers:—

"MY DARLING HUGH,

"I cannot help writing to you, because I am so miserable. O Hugh, everything is dreadful now you are gone. You don't know how unkind they are to me. All my things are turned out of

their places, and Chenda is so selfish, she gets all the best places for herself, and nobody thinks about me. I want you so much, Hugh—oh, so much. O Hugh, I don't know how to get on without you. Won't you come home, darling Hugh?—please do. I am very very miserable, dear darling Hugh.

"Your own little

"FLOSSIE."

Flossie sat and looked at the letter. What would Hugh feel when he read it? How distressed and grieved he would be! And supposing he really could not come home,—why, it would nearly break his heart.

Was it all quite true? Were the Marshalls really *all* so unkind to Flossie? Colonel Marshall, Mrs. Marshall, Edric, Gerard,—had she had a hard word from any of them? Nay, even Vernon and Elsie, though they might tease a little, had really been very good to her.

"But they've no right to be here at all—turning Hugh out."

But Hugh had told her that they *had* a right. Which knew best—Flossie or Hugh?

"I can't help it. Oh dear, I'm so dreadfully miserable. Chenda is so horrid and so cruel. I haven't felt cross like this for a long long while. It's all Chenda's fault."

Was it? What if——

Flossie hardly liked to look that thought in the face, but it came pushing its way into her mind, whether she would or no.

Was she the Master's little handmaid? What if—what if the Master had been giving her a little trouble to bear for Him,—a little bitter cup to drink,—and had wanted her to take it sweetly and patiently for His sake?"

What sort of a little handmaid had she been this day? Temper, sullenness, pride, hatred, disobligingness, selfishness—the dark list rose slowly up in Flossie's heart. She had not kept close to her Master. She had not listened for His gentle voice of command. She had not cared to do His bidding. She had not thought of doing Him honour. She had only wanted her own pleasure and her own way. Oh, what must Gerard think of it all, after the way she had talked to him only the day before? How should she ever dare to speak to him again about the Lord Jesus?

Thoroughly softened and repentant, Flossie threw herself down on the ground, and cried heartily. She did not know how time went, nor how long she had been alone. But presently the door opened and shut, and Mrs. Marshall's voice said,—

"Flossie, you did not come to me in the drawing-room, so I have come to speak to you instead."

Flossie raised herself up slowly on her feet, and

hid her face in Mrs. Marshall's dress. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"Why did you not come and tell me so?"

"I don't know. I—couldn't."

Flossie burst out crying afresh. Mrs. Marshall looked towards the desk.

"Have you been writing to your brother?"

"Yes—oh, no—it mustn't go. Oh, please don't read it."

"No one will read your letters to him unless you give your leave. Flossie, will you let me see it this time?"

"Oh, please don't. It isn't true," said Flossie, in distress.

"I am sure you do not feel now as you did a little while ago. Still, I wish to read it. I wish to do so, but you shall forbid it, if you like."

Flossie's answer was to place the sheet in Mrs. Marshall's hand, and to hide her face again. She heard the paper rustle softly once or twice, and then Mrs. Marshall asked,—

"Would you like it to go?"

"Oh, no! It isn't true. I do love you, and you are kind," sobbed Flossie.

"Then I think you would give your brother needless pain by sending this to him," and Mrs. Marshall tore the sheet across. After a minute she said in a low voice, "I have been disappointed in my little Flossie to-day. I thought that she was trying

to serve the Lord Jesus, and that nothing would so grieve her as to grieve Him. Was I quite mistaken, Flossie? Look up at me, and tell me."

Flossie's humble sorrowful face was lifted for a moment, and then buried again in her dress. But Mrs. Marshall did not seem to need a further answer. She stroked Flossie's hair tenderly.

"Dear child, even with those who do love and serve Him, the tempter sometimes takes them unawares, and makes them stumble. But the loving Lord will lift you up again, and wash away the sin, and give you fresh strength."

"I know——" said Flossie, with a catch in her breath, for she did not doubt *that* part of the matter. "But—but——"

"But what? He is ever ready to forgive, dear Flossie."

"I know——" repeated Flossie. "But they—they won't forget."

"Who?"

"Downstairs."

"It will do no harm to you, dear, that they should remember. We all need a little humbling, now and then."

"Oh, no,—it isn't *that*——"

Flossie broke off, unable to explain, but Mrs. Marshall seemed to understand.

"Flossie, is it that you feel you are like a soldier

who has let his Captain's banner trail in the dust?—that you have not let your light shine to your Master's honour?"

Flossie's tears were answer enough.

"Ah, that is the worst part of a fall, if we really love Him. Dear Flossie, there is one thing you can do, and that is to say openly how wrong you have been. I do not say you must. Chenda was wrong, as well as you, I am afraid. But you have nothing to do with that. If you would lessen the stain you have brought upon your banner, you can only do it by saying you were wrong, and begging pardon. It is hard—humbling—I know well, but it is the right thing."

Flossie shrank very much from the thought. She almost said and quite felt that she could not. But when they had talked a little longer, and Mrs. Marshall rose to go, Flossie stayed behind. She said nothing to Mrs. Marshall. She only knelt down by her bed, and confessed her sin to her Master, and prayed His loving pardon, and begged very earnestly that she might have strength to do the other also. For she knew that though to herself it seemed impossible, yet her Master could take her by the hand, and make her do His will. And then Flossie stood up, and went quietly down to the schoolroom, and said the very words which she had thought she could not say. And somehow there was a strange feeling of rest in her heart

which made her not mind Chenda's cold kiss, and Vernon's and Elsie's curious glances. If the little handmaid's Master were pleased, what did it matter what others thought?

Still she had reason long after to regret that day Chenda's words had left a sting behind, which Flossie could not lose. She was often distressed to find bitter feelings towards Chenda springing up in her heart. And Vernon and Elsie never quite forgot the temper they had seen in Flossie, and sometimes tried to tease and "put her out" as they called it, just for the sake of a little fun. It was not a kind or a right sort of fun, but they did it. Flossie had some hard battles to fight.

Worst of all, little Gerard came to her for no more quiet talks alone. He rather shrank from her for awhile, and did not seem to care to be with her. Flossie tried to win his heart by being very gentle to him, but after the way she had behaved she felt ashamed to speak to him again as she had done before. And Gerard asked her no more questions, and told her no more secrets. He was a quiet lonely little boy, and seemed to want nothing but to be always by his mother's side.

CHAPTER XIII.

A NARROW ESCAPE.

"*The Grove, May 15th.*

"MY OWN DARLING DEAREST HUGH,

"I am going to send you such a long letter this month, because my last was a short one. I was doing so many lessons that it did not seem as if I had time for anything. But now I am getting more used to having so much to do, and I don't get so many bad marks. I did not like to tell you at first, Hugh, because I thought you would be sorry, but all my lessons were wrong. Miss Wilmot is so different from Miss Brice. I don't mean that she isn't kind, you know, because she is, but she never will pass over a single wrong word in anything. And I do think I must be very stupid, because Chenda and Elsie can learn their lessons three times as fast as I can, and rattle them off without a bit of trouble.

"How I wish I could see you again! Oh, how I do wish it! The time seems so long since you went. I have been thinking about you ever so much to-day."

"Not that I don't always think of you,—every bit of every day. You know that quite well. But I am thinking about you very very much to-day particularly, because it is your birthday, and I do so want to give you a kiss and a present, darling Hugh.

"I can't do that, so I am going to begin my letter to you instead. I am sitting all alone in the dining-room, and Fido is lying close to my feet, just blinking one eye every time I move. He is so good, Hugh. He never wants punishing now. He always does just exactly what I tell him dear old fellow! And isn't it funny? he has taken to Gerard so much, and he will obey Gerard almost as well as me, but he seems never to think of Uncle Norman as his master.

"I always say 'Uncle Norman' and 'Aunt Elsie' now, because they want it, and Mrs. Knight has just told me to call her 'Aunt Netta.' It is very nice to do so, only I don't think Chenda likes it. She always takes such care to tell everybody that I am not really her cousin.

"I love Aunt Elsie very much, Hugh,—oh, so much. If I had you too, I should like to live with her always; only I would *rather* live with you all alone, you know. But I do think she is so sweet. You can't think how fond she and Aunt Netta are of one another. But I can't see that they are alike. Aunt Netta is so pretty and bright, and

always seems to want to be helping somebody. But Aunt Elsie—O Hugh, I do love her dear gentle pale face, and soft way of doing things. She couldn't say a hard word if she tried. She's so beautiful—at least her smile is. Do you know, Uncle Norman sometimes lets me go into the study, and he tells me stories. And once he told me that when Aunt Elsie was a girl, her Papa and Mamma were very poor, and Aunt Elsie used to work so dreadfully hard for them, that she made herself ill, and that is why she never can be really strong. The least little thing tires her out.

"O Hugh, I wish nobody was poor. If you were not poor, you need not be away in China!

"*May 18th.*

"I had to stop in my letter, but I wrote a good long piece for one time, didn't I? We have just been a long walk, picking spring-flowers, and Willa with us. Gerard never can go far. I wonder why he can't. He is not a bit like other boys. It has been a half-holiday, so Edric and Vernon went with us, which was nice. I don't like Vernon coming alone, because he teases, but he takes more care when Edric is with us. Not that Edric says much, you know, for he only brings a book, and reads it nearly all the way; but he won't let Vernon be *too* tiresome.

"I don't think Willa is my friend now, much.

She is always walking about with her arm round Chenda, and she tells Chenda all her secrets. I'm trying not to be cross about it, Hugh darling, but I didn't think Willa would do that. She might love Chenda and me too. But she told me yesterday that she thought it would be nice, if we could be always two and two, and asked why I didn't make a great friend of Elsie. But I could not do that, because I don't care for Elsie. I wish I did love her more, but all she likes is romping with Vernon, and painting pictures, and she seems so much younger than I am. I think your going has made me feel older somehow. Oh, I couldn't make a friend of her.

"And I told Willa so, and Willa said, Well, Chenda was *her* friend. And I got cross, Hugh, and said, Yes, I knew she was, and Willa didn't care for me now. And then Chenda came and put her arm round Willa, and they went into a corner, and whispered secrets. And I felt so bad. O dear, I did want you so. I didn't think Willa would have been like that,—did you? She used to seem so fond of me.

"*May 22nd.*

"I must get on with my letter, because I want it to be a good long one. And I have a question to ask you. Only it is such a time to wait for the answer,—three whole months and a half!

"Sometimes I feel so wrong about Chenda. Oh,

I wish I didn't,—but it doesn't seem as if I *could* make myself love her. I wouldn't say this, only I always do tell you everything, and then you help me.

"People that come to the house always like Chenda. She is so pretty and so polite—almost like a little grown-up lady. I wonder if I shall ever be so polite to everybody, and not feel shy. Only, you know, Hugh, she isn't so polite when we are all alone together. Don't you think people ought to be always polite? Aunt Elsie and Aunt Netta are just as gentle and sweet and polite with us children in the schoolroom, as with visitors in the drawing-room. But Chenda isn't. She says rude things. She says I am a charity-girl——

"Hugh, I did not mean to say that, but it seemed to run right off the end of my pen. And I don't want to have to write this big sheet all over again, or to make a great blot. So I will leave it, for I suppose it is true, only—Chenda need not say it.

"O Hugh, I do wish I was not a charity-girl; I do wish it so dreadfully. I had a good cry yesterday thinking about it. Nobody says such a thing except Chenda, and I am sure Uncle Norman and Aunt Elsie would not be pleased to hear her. She said it very soon after you went away, and she said it yesterday again, because I vexed her. And yet I don't think I did wrong.

"That is another thing which is hard. *You* always knew what I did, and what I meant, and let me

explain. But now sometimes I am punished when I don't feel that I am wrong, and that is so hard to bear. Chenda somehow hardly ever gets blamed. She keeps quiet, and looks good, and always manages to throw it off on somebody else. And Elsie—I don't think she always says quite the truth, if she is asked questions. And Miss Wilmot so often thinks I am the one in the wrong.

"O Hugh, I know you will tell me to be patient, and not to answer again, but that is so hard. I get vexed, and say too much, and then Miss Wilmot tells me not to say a word, and I feel so cross. And I can't make myself feel different. What shall I do, Hugh? How am I to get over it? I wish I could never be put out at anything. Sometimes I don't think I can really be the Master's little handmaid at all, and yet I want it so much. O Hugh, I want it more and more,—more than anything else in all the world, because it does make me so happy, darling Hugh,—only some days I get angry, and then I feel bad, and then it doesn't seem as if I were His handmaid. Do you think I am, really? What am I to do? Please tell me, darling Hugh. Please do help me.

"*May 23rd.*

"The letter is going off to-day, so I must finish off. And you will send me an answer as quick as possible, won't you?—because I do *so* want one.

"To-morrow is going to be a holiday, because Uncle Norman and Aunt Elsie, and Mr. Knight and Aunt Netta, are all four going to drive to some house ten miles off, and stay there all day. I don't know who it is they are going to see, but Aunt Netta begged we might all have a holiday, and that Willa might be with us. So I daresay we shall have some good games of play——"

"I say, Floss——"

Flossie looked up, as Vernon dashed into the room.

"I say, Floss, what are you after here? Edric's in the grove, waiting to give you a swing."

"Yes, he promised. Oh, I didn't see it was so late," said Flossie, looking up at the clock. "I'll come directly."

"You'd better be quick. Edric won't wait."

"Couldn't I just put my letter up?"

"If you do!" and Vernon made a face. "Chenda's in a tremendous stew already, because Edric is keeping the swing for you."

"Why, Chenda and Willa had it all the play-hours yesterday and the day before," said Flossie, getting up. "I'll come back and finish this presently."

"Lots of time. The letters won't go for an hour and a half. I say! you don't mean to say you've scrawled all that!"

"It's to Hugh. Oh, please, Vernon."

Vernon laughed, let go his grasp of her paper, and catching her hand, dragged her by main force out of the room.

"O Vernon, don't; you hurt my wrist."

"Come along then. What dawdles girls are!"

Flossie was determined not to win that name, at all events, and breaking merrily loose from him, she set off at a pace which fairly matched his own.

"Well, you *are* a runner," he said, when she stopped breathlessly at the entrance to the grove: "I never saw a girl to beat you at it."

"I've always been in the country," panted Flossie, as they passed under shady elms towards the swing. Edric was seated in it, moving softly to and fro, with a comical little smile of determination about the corners of his mouth. Chenda and Willa stood in front.

"It is very unfair," were the words which struck upon Flossie's ears.

"What is unfair?" asked Flossie.

"Edric keeping the swing for you like this. As if you had any right," said Chenda, using her favourite expression.

"If Flossie hasn't, I have," said Edric. "I do dislike all that perpetual talk about *rights*."

"The way boys spar is nothing to the way girls do," remarked Vernon, giving the swing a slight push, with his brother in it. "Come now——"

"Get in, Flossie," said Edric, standing up, but she held back, though with a great effort of self-denial.

"If Chenda wants it, please swing her first, Edric."

"Stuff! get in," said Edric good-temperedly. "I promised you the first turn this afternoon."

"I'd rather not, please. Chenda may."

"Of course I may. I don't need your leave," said Chenda.

"That's a gracious reception of Flossie's kindness, anyhow," said Edric drily. "Flossie, do as you are told. Up with you this moment!"

He enforced his words with his hands, and Flossie would have had to offer positive resistance to remain on the ground. The next minute all sense of Chenda's annoyance was lost in the delicious rush to and fro through the fresh spring air. The effect of swinging upon Flossie was always to put her into wild spirits. She forgot even to notice that Chenda and Elsie had disappeared. The boys below fairly laughed at her glowing cheeks, and dancing eyes, and little cries of eager delight.

"Oh, isn't it nice? O Edric, isn't it nice? I haven't had such a swing I don't know when. Oh, send me higher—higher—it can't be too high. Why, I caught a glimpse right over the garden wall. I never did that before. Oh, don't stop! It's lovely!"

"Hold tight, Floss! Not too high?"

"Oh, no: it never makes me giddy. Oh! I

thought I was going to stick in that bough. Wouldn't it be fun if I did? Why, I might almost jump off into the boughs. But I won't try that."

Her excitement excited them, and they sent her up more and more, to a really perilous height. Edric's usual caution somehow rather deserted him under the influence of her fearless raptures. Exciting them, and excited still more herself by their answering shouts and witticisms, she grew reckless. To Edric's horror, he saw her, far in the air above, quit her hold of the ropes, and clap her hands gleefully together. What he felt himself at the moment he never afterwards forgot.

For in the instant instinctive catch at the ropes again, one hand missed—not *both*, or the next instant a little senseless body must have lain on the ground at their feet. But she was slipping out of the seat,—swinging round,—clinging somehow,—anyhow,—no one ever knew how. Edric only knew that, as the swing came down with its heavy rush, she had not left it. He caught the rope, and caught her together, the shake loosening her slight remaining hold. But his grasp on her dress was firm, and the next instant she stood upright, glowing still, and as composed as if she had hardly known her danger, while both the boys were pale as ashes.

"FLOSSIE!" was all Edric could say.

"I didn't mean—I couldn't help——"

"Flossie, were you mad? It was awful. Why, you were within a shave of falling."

"Yes; I thought I couldn't have clung," said Flossie soberly, her colour going down a little. "But I don't think I had time to be frightened."

"You were never nearer death in your life than at that moment," said Edric, half provoked at her seeming coolness, half afraid she might attempt the same again, if not impressed with the danger she had escaped.

Flossie looked earnestly up, and then down. "How high was I? Do you think it would have killed me?"

"Think! Look here, Floss, you were up at the height of that bent bough. I'll take precious care how I swing you in future."

A slight shiver passed over her. "I didn't know I was so very high. But I never did such a thing before, and I won't ever again."

"I'm sure I hope not." The boys could hardly get breath after that moment's horror. "Look here, Floss; don't you go and tell Mamma you have been and nearly killed yourself."

Flossie looked thoughtful. "Oughtn't Aunt Elsie to know? If Hugh were here, I should tell him, because it was wrong of me. Hugh always said I was to hold tight. I shan't ever forget again."

"I'll tell my father. We were pretty equally reckless, and I'm as much to blame as you. But it won't do to give Mamma a bad night."

"No," said Flossie dreamily. "Where are Chenda and Willa?"

"Gone away." Edric was swinging one of the ropes to and fro. "Look here, Flossie, I don't know whether you had not better get in again for a few minutes. I'll not send you high, but we mustn't turn you out a coward."

"I don't think I'm afraid," said Flossie gently. "It was all my own fault, and I will take care never to let go of the ropes again. I'll swing to-morrow, please, Edric, as much as you like."

"Not now?"

"No, not just now."

Edric caught her as she was moving away. "What's the matter, Floss? You don't think I'm angry?"

"Oh, no, and it was so kind of you to swing me," said Flossie, with a little smile. "It was quite lovely, till I was so silly."

"What's the matter then? what are you thinking about?"

Flossie hesitated a moment. "Only—what you said."

"What?"

"That I hadn't ever—ever been—nearer——"

"You don't mean to say you are taking that to

heart? I only want you to know the danger of such pranks."

"Yes, I know. But please let me go."

"What for?"

"I must finish my letter to Hugh. It has to go off directly. And I want to think a little."

Flossie stopped, but Edric released her, and the two boys watched the childish figure pass quietly out of sight.

"Queer little thing!" muttered Vernon.

"Queer! She is worth twenty of Chenda or Elsie," responded Edric. "I like her immensely. But she's so fearless, that I could not help saying something of the sort to warn her, and it was true enough."

CHAPTER XIV.

A LOSS.

"I CAN'T *think* where it can have gone."

"Where what has gone?"

"My letter to Hugh. O Miss Wilmot, you haven't seen it, have you? I don't know what to do. Willis is just going off with the letters to the post."

"And yours is not ready? My dear, you were told plainly enough to have it done by this afternoon."

"Yes, I know, and it was all ready except just my name, and being put up. And the boys called me off for a swing, and I left it on this table, and when I came back I found all my paper and envelopes and things blown over on the floor; but my letter to Hugh isn't among them."

"If you left it among them, it must be there still. The wind could not carry it out of the room."

"No, and every sheet of it has gone—such a long letter—and I wanted it *so* much to go by this mail," said Flossie, with starting tears.

"Have you looked about thoroughly, and asked

anybody?" asked Miss Wilmot, who was busily writing herself to catch the same post, and could only give half attention.

"Chenda says she was in here, and saw them all blown over, and Gerard fetched something out for Aunt Elsie, but nobody else seems to have been. I have been hunting for nearly half an hour, and I think I have looked everywhere."

Miss Wilmot was too much occupied to answer, and Flossie stood mournfully gazing out of the window, wondering if anybody could or would help her. Presently Colonel Marshall came in, but he too was evidently hurried.

"I have been speaking to Chenda and the boys, Miss Wilmot, and they promise unlimited caution, and obedience to Nurse's commands. It would be a thousand pities that you should not go."

"I don't like to ask it," said Miss Wilmot, with her colour deepening. "It seems almost wrong,—and yet—not to see him——"

"It would never do," said the Colonel decisively. "Flossie, do you think you will manage to be a very staid and well-behaved little damsel to-morrow, with all the elders of the party away?"

Flossie looked half alarmed.

"All?" she said.

"Aunt Elsie and I are going, as you know. Miss Wilmot was to have spent Friday with her friends at Danbury, to say good-bye to her brother,

but a telegram has just arrived, urging her to go to-morrow instead. Otherwise she will miss seeing him altogether, and it may be years before they meet again. We can't get off our engagement, and yet Miss Wilmot must go. You will understand what she feels, Flossie, won't you? How do you think you young ones can get on during a long day without us?"

"I shouldn't like Miss Wilmot not to go," said Flossie, flushing in her turn, and wondering whether she ought not to tell him about the swing.

"You are such a careful little woman, that I shall hardly need to warn you not to be too wild."

"Oh, but I was wild just now," said Flossie breathlessly, "and I did do a stupid thing, and I might have been hurt. But I'll take care to-morrow. O Uncle Norman, I can't find my letter to Hugh!"

"Lost it! what a pity! And Miss Wilmot has done, so the letters must go off at once. Well, dear, you must find it, and make it grow a little more before next mail, and try to learn the useful lesson of always putting things into their right places."

"He doesn't understand a bit," thought Flossie disconsolately. "Nobody understands. Nobody cares. And oh! Hugh will be so disappointed."

She remained at the window a minute or two longer, till Willis rode off. Too late now, even if

the letter could be found. Flossie slipped away quietly, and ran upstairs to her own room.

It was very hard. Flossie could not help feeling that. She had tried to write such a nice long letter that would please Hugh. And she did so wish a speedy answer to her question. And it was so strange that the letter should have vanished, nobody knowing how. Suppose some one had put it away in his or her desk or drawer by accident, and were to read it through! Flossie gave a little shudder at the thought. Oh, that would be dreadful! Or suppose the wind had somehow carried away the sheets through the open window, and wafted them right away down into the village! That would be no less dreadful.

"I wonder if there is anything wrong in the letter, that makes me mind so very much anybody seeing it," thought Flossie. "I do say things about myself to Hugh, that I couldn't say to any one except him. And there's no harm in that. But then there are other things too—not kind things—about Chenda and Willa and Elsie. I think I should be ashamed to have them read.

"Is it that they are wrong? I thought I might say anything in the world to Hugh. But I don't know now. I almost think—I almost think—any single unkind word about anybody, even in ever so secret a letter to him, must be bad. For if I'm a little handmaid, I've only to do and say the things

that my Master tells me. And I'm sure,—oh, quite, quite sure—that the Lord Jesus never said an unkind word of anybody, and He wouldn't wish me to do it either.

"I wonder if I shall be glad by-and-by that the letter didn't go. I wonder if even — even — perhaps——" Flossie paused and looked reverently up to the blue sky above;—"I wonder if perhaps He doesn't wish that it *should* have gone,—and so —and so——" Flossie stopped again. "I don't think I'm wrong to fancy this,—just that it *may* be. For losing the letter is a trouble, and Hugh always said the very littlest bits of trouble always came from His hand—because He loved us. I usen't to care about that, but I do now.

"Only there's the question I wanted to ask Hugh. What shall I do about it? For if I mustn't tell him how Chenda treats me, how can I ask it? O I do wonder why Chenda can't bear me so. Why, when I asked her if she had been in the room, she would hardly look at me. I think she seems to hate me more every day. I can't think why. And I did so want to tell Hugh, and ask him what to do,—and how to feel better about Chenda down in my heart.

"Perhaps for *that* it wouldn't be wrong. Only I needn't say so much about her. I needn't say so much as I did in that letter. I got angry with her, as I was writing it, and wanted Hugh to dislike her. I don't think he would dislike her, because he

never seems to dislike anybody, but he would be very very sorry. And it doesn't seem right to make him sorry all that way off. Aunt Elsie told me I ought to write him very happy letters, to cheer him up.

"Perhaps I oughtn't to say anything about it to him. But what am I to do? I can't ask Aunt Elsie. It would be as bad to complain of Chenda to her, or to Uncle Norman. Besides, I couldn't do it.

"What shall I do?"

Flossie's eyes fell on her Bible, lying just before her. And a sweet thought came creeping softly into her heart. Who sent it there? Ah, Flossie might have thought that afternoon of her brother's words,—"Sometimes the Master will call you to come and take a seat at His feet, and look up in His face, and hear what He has to say."

She could not ask Hugh this question which was troubling her; but could she not ask Another? She might not tell Hugh her difficulty about Chenda; but was there not ONE whom she might tell? Hugh was a long long way off. Flossie's Master was very near. A letter to Hugh could not be sent now for many days. Flossie could speak to her Master at any moment. Hugh's answer could not reach her in less than three or four months. Flossie's Master could answer at once,—ay, the very moment her prayer was uttered. Hugh could only

advise Flossie what she had better do. Flossie's Master could do everything for her,—could change Flossie's heart and Chenda's heart, just as much as was needed. Hugh was loving, but Flossie's Master, the gentle Lord Jesus, was ever so much more loving. Hugh could only understand the matter so far as Flossie might explain it. Flossie's Master knew the whole from first to last, far better than Flossie herself did.

"But I'll tell Him," said Flossie, in a low calm whisper. "Hugh always said the Lord Jesus liked us to tell Him everything, just as if He didn't know. I'll tell Him, and ask Him to make Chenda and me love each other.

"For I want it—oh, very very much. Chenda can't bear me now, and I'm afraid I can't bear her. And if I belong to the Lord Jesus, I ought to love her, and never to mind what she says—never to be cross, I mean.

"Because, this afternoon, if I had died——" Flossie clasped her hands, and looked up again at the blue sky; "if I had died,—as I might,—for Edric said so. It was very near, he said. I might have been killed. And I think I would have been safe. I think I needn't be afraid to die; for I know Jesus loves me. But oh, I shouldn't like—I couldn't bear—not to have learnt to love Chenda first. It would be dreadful that she should remember me saying hard words, and each of us disliking the other up

to the last. For I want Chenda to know that I am the Master's little handmaid, and I want her to be one herself too; and I'm sure she must think me little enough like it now."

And Flossie knelt down beside the bed. She did not wait till night-time. She had early learnt the lesson, that if we put off praying when we feel inclined, the wish may go, and leave us hard and cold. For sometimes the Master calls His little handmaids by His Spirit in their hearts to come and kneel at His feet, and tell Him what they are doing and what they want. And if they answer, "Oh, no, I can't just now,—I will by-and-by,"—then when "by-and-by" comes, it may be that the Holy Spirit is speaking to them so plainly no longer.

Flossie did not wait. She knelt down by the bedside, and hid her face, and softly murmured all she had to say,—all she had wanted to tell Hugh. Ay, and more than she could have told him. No holding back was needed here. But Flossie found she had not so much to say about Chenda's unkindness, as her own want of love. She told her Master all the trouble—every bit of it,—and asked Him that somehow she might learn what she was to do, and how she was to win Chenda's heart.

Such a happy quiet feeling crept all over Flossie when she rose from her knees, and went again to the window. She thought there could hardly ever

have been so lovely a spring evening. It was just as if the very air around were all shining with her Master's smile. Flossie had never been so happy in her life. She felt so very very sure her prayer had been heard. She hardly minded now the loss of her letter. She wondered she could have written so of Chenda. Was it love which was springing up already in her heart? Certainly the feeling of dislike was gone,—had faded altogether away.

Then the tea-bell rang, and Flossie went lightly down into the schoolroom. The boys wondered at the little girl's sweet sober face that evening. What had come over her? Chenda was cold, and looked at her strangely, and would hardly speak civilly to her; but the sunshine of loving peace in Flossie's heart made it easy to bear patiently with Chenda's unkindness. She did not even feel inclined to answer sharply or coldly back again. She only seemed to want to do just what her Master would wish.

CHAPTER XV.

LITTLE DESERT-ISLANDERS!

"I WONDER how we shall get through to-day," thought Flossie rather anxiously, next morning, as she stood in the open doorway, watching the carriage drive away. Colonel and Mrs. Marshall and Mr. and Mrs. Knight were inside, and Miss Wilmot had started in the gig an hour before. And the boys were fidgetting idly on the pathway, and Chenda and Willa were standing affectionately arm-in-arm within the hall, and Elsie was prancing about on the grass-plat. For breakfast was over, and no lessons had to be done, and there was nobody at hand except Nurse to keep anybody in order, and Nurse was upstairs in the nursery.

"What's to be done now?" enquired Vernon, seeming almost to echo Flossie's thought: "I vote that we have some jolly fun to-day."

"Oh, do!" cried Elsie. "What shall it be, Vernon?"

"You boys are not to get into mischief," said Chenda sedately.

"No, nor you girls either," said Vernon in return. "Floss is as likely as anybody."

"Oh, no, I mean to be careful to-day, Vernon. Don't you think we had better all go indoors and have some book to read aloud, — a nice story book?"

"Bother reading!" said Vernon; "Edric does enough of that for half a dozen of us."

Chenda had meant to propose the very same thing herself; but now that Flossie had proposed it, she was too proud to agree.

"No, *I* shall not stay indoors," she said; "Flossie can, of course, if she likes: Willa and I are going into the grove."

"I say, Floss, I've got to give you a bit of a swing to-day," said Edric.

"Very well," said Flossie quietly. "Edric, did you tell Uncle Norman?"

"Why, no,—I thought it better not, as they *had* to go away for the day. Make him fidgetty without need. Besides, you say you did half tell him." Edric did not care to admit even to himself the consciousness that a full explanation might have resulted in the use of the swing being forbidden that day. Only a little later he would have been thankful enough, could he have recalled his decision, and adopted the more open and straightforward course.

"Tell what?" asked Chenda.

"Oh, only a secret between Floss and me."

"Flossie is not going to keep the swing all day I can tell you."

"Not if I swing her, certainly. My arms would protest against twelve hours of such exertion."

"Willa and I are going to sit in the swing and read," said Chenda, jealous of her rights.

"Like two infants in a cradle,—rocking gently,—lullaby, lullaby!" said Vernon, in a sing-song voice. "There, don't be put out, Chenda. You'd better take possession of the swing, and keep it. But I say, all this is rather slow work. Can't we get up a little fun?"

"I wonder if Nurse would mind——" said Flossie; "or Uncle Norman, or Aunt Elsie. It's just the sort of day——"

"What for?" asked Willa.

"Why, it was before you came, Willa. But one summer we had such fun. We had some friends staying here,—two boys and two girls. And Hugh let us spend one whole day by ourselves in the grove, and we had our meals there, and did up a great tent, and pretended to go to sleep in it. Oh, I do wonder if we might."

"Hurrah!" shouted Vernon, flinging his cap in the air. "You're the most sensible girl that ever lived, Flossie! Splendid idea! Lets go off directly."

"No, not till we have asked Nurse," said

Flossie. "Aunt Elsie said we were to do just as she told us."

At the first moment Chenda had perversely almost set herself against the idea, tempting as it sounded; for she could not bear Flossie even to seem to take the lead in anything. Now she turned round on another tack, and said,—

"Nurse has nothing to do with it. She is not *my* nurse. Flossie can obey her if she likes."

"If she isn't your nurse, she is Mamma's servant, and Mamma's deputy-governor to-day," said Edric. "Disobeying her would be disobeying Mamma,—eh, Floss?"

"What's a deputy?" asked Elsie.

"Somebody standing in the place of somebody else. Nurse is left in charge of us to-day, in place of Mamma and Miss Wilmot. Besides, you talk nonsense, Chenda. How are we to get our meals there, without Nurse's help?"

"Shall I go and ask her?" enquired Flossie.

"Yes, go. She is more likely to give way to you than to anybody. Do your best to persuade her, Floss!"

For the boys were fascinated by the proposal and during Flossie's absence they consulted eagerly as to materials for making a tent. Willa joined eagerly in the discussion, and even Gerard drew nearer, and listened with interested eyes. By the time Flossie and Nurse came back together,

they were all so set upon the plan, that Nurse would have found it hard work to prevent them from carrying it out. However, she saw no reason to object. Some sort of amusement was necessary, she knew, to keep the children out of mischief, and she was really grateful to Flossie for suggesting anything which would ensure their remaining near at hand.

So she threw herself into the scheme, and made few difficulties. Would they like her to be one of their party, and help them? she asked, but Gerard's was the only heartily assenting voice. Even Flossie, with her recollections of a former day of delight, thought a grown person's presence would spoil the fun. They must quite set up for themselves, and manage everything.

"But I can't leave you all day," said Nurse. "I must look in now and then."

Well,—she might come with the dinner and the tea, and put them down at the entrance of the grove, only she must not let herself be seen. They were going to pretend they were wrecked on a desert-island, and it would not do to have visitors from the inhabited world.

"But how if you get to quarrelling among yourselves?" asked Nurse, not without reason.

"You shut up, Nurse,—we're not going to quarrel," said Vernon.

"I'll tell you what," cried Willa, with a spring of

delight. "Suppose we hang up a flag, or a bit of something on a tree, where Nurse can see it, and as long as it's there she will know we're all right."

"Yes, and pretend it is our signal of distress to passing ships," said Vernon. "Good notion, Willa."

"A green flag,—signifying peace,—at the first quarrel to be pulled down and replaced by a red flag, signifying bloody war," added Edric gravely.

"O Edric!" laughed two or three merry voices.

"Why not? There's a green and a red flag, both at hand,—those you and I made last year, Vernon. I know where they are."

"Splendid! I declare I had forgotten them altogether. Now, Nurse, you understand? The green means,—'All serene!' The red means,—'Distractions on the island! Ahoy!—to the rescue!"

Vernon shouted his explanations with the full strength of no feeble voice, and Nurse's hands went up to her ears.

"And I suppose you mean me to sit up at a top bedroom window all day, watching the flags, Master Vernon?"

"Oh, you can look now and then, Nurse," said Flossie,—adding in a whisper, "And you know you'll have glimpses of us too among the trees."

Nurse nodded. "And how about Master Gerard?" she asked.

"I'd like to go," said Gerard.

"I'll take care of him," put in Edric. "He shall not be teased, or made to tire himself."

Gerard's eyes looked imploring, and the others pleaded vehemently. Nurse yielded at length, on receiving repeated promises from Edric and Flossie to watch him closely, and bring him home if he should seem in the least degree over-fatigued.

Then began the happy bustle of preparation. They held a meeting upon the grass-plat first, and passed various resolutions with regard to the order of events during the day. Flossie was under constant appeal, for the boys were eager to make an exact copy of the former day, which seemed to have left so happy an impression on her mind.

Dinner had not been taken to them then,—therefore it should not be now. Nobody had come to enquire after them then,—therefore nobody should come now. A cold lunch packed in baskets must content the desert-islanders. Nurse might look for the flag as often as she liked, but she was on no account to intrude herself personally. Nurse protested that this was contrary to agreement, and was met by a shower of arguments. How could they possibly believe themselves on a desert-island, if she came in and out? And where was the need? By red flag or by messenger she could be summoned at any moment. A compromise was at length effected,—Nurse promising on no account to show her face, and the desert-islanders consent-

ing to an occasional peep on her part through the shrubbery-door.

The next thing was to gather together piles of old shawls, wraps and rugs, also a couple of small chairs, and two or three low stools, supposed to be saved from the wreck. Nurse undertook to pack a supply of provisions in baskets, advising them to leave the matter of choice to her. A pop-gun and wooden sword, for self-defence against wild beasts, a book for Edric, and some fancy-work for Chenda and Willa, with the addition of a basket of professed "odds and ends" in Flossie's hand, completed the very considerable load, which the youthful islanders had to carry with them.

Probably this business of preparation was the merriest part of the whole concern. Chenda's was the only sober face visible, and Flossie was in a state of wild delight. She was bounding downstairs, hat in hand, when a voice came up to her distinctly from the hall below,—

"Yes; I have nothing to say against it, Willa, but it is easy to see why Flossie chose this game."

"Why?" enquired Willa.

"Why, of course, because she wanted to take the lead. Flossie always likes to be first. Just see how she is managing everything her own way."

Flossie came to a sudden pause. Her first im-

pulse was to start forward, with a hot contradiction. It was so unkind, so unfair, so untrue. She was trying so hard to please them all, and to keep the boys out of mischief. How could Chenda say such a thing? Flossie had a great mind to refuse to go to the Grove at all now.

But the momentary impulse was checked, Flossie hardly knew how. Like a flash came into her mind the words, "Who when He was reviled, reviled not again;" "Even Christ pleased not Himself." And like a flash also went up the quick helpless appeal, "O Lord Jesus, please *don't* let me be angry."

Very quietly Flossie walked down the last half of the flight. Chenda looked up, and must have known that her words had been overheard. She gave her head a little toss, expecting Flossie to break into words of self-defence. But Flossie only said gently,—

"I think we are nearly ready now, Chenda. Hadn't we better start?"

Chenda made no answer whatever, but the next moment Vernon's voice called loudly from the garden. And not even Chenda could keep back her laughter, at sight of the two boys with their heavy loads. Edric was never particularly fond of exerting himself, but Vernon was literally staggering beneath a built-up pent-house of shawls and rugs, stools and baskets.

"How you girls do dawdle!" was his salute.

"Come, pick up the rest, and let's be off. I can't keep this going long."

So the girls laded themselves lightly with what remained, and the seven then began their march in good earnest towards the Grove, Nurse following behind.

"We're all on board ship, now," shouted Vernon, in high glee. "Tremendous waves! wind blowing fit to capsize the Great Eastern. Don't walk so straight, all of you,—can't you stagger a bit?—deck's all of a slope, you know. That's it, Floss! you're a first-rate hand at a bit of fun. Chenda, you're the only one that can't do it—you're a regular spoil-sport."

Chenda did not think it dignified to assume the rolling gait demanded by her brother, but the others set to work with more or less heartiness. Vernon himself gave the example so vigorously, that he lost his balance, and rolled headlong down a small bank, with his load on the top of him.

"Man overboard! Ahoy—to the rescue!" cried Vernon, amidst peals of merriment. "I've smashed an ant's nest—a lot of sea-anemones, I mean. Stop grinning, can't you, Edric, and lend a hand. Well done, Nurse—captain, I mean. You're a good one at a pinch. But you've got to be drowned, if you are on board with us, for we don't want you on the island. Now then, give a hand! That's right. Glad to be on deck, messmates. I say!

what billows! mountains high. Never mind, let's sing together,—

"'Our march is o'er the mountain-wave,
Our home is on the deep.'"

"It's fatiguing work having to act waves as well as passengers," muttered Edric, stopping to wipe his face for a moment.

"Nobody expects to go through a hurricane without being tired, you lazy fellow! At it again, girls! we're nearing our journey's end. At least—no, we're a long way out of our course. But see there—breakers ahead! breakers ahead! Captain, don't you put your hands up to your ears. Breakers ahead! I say! ship bearing right down upon them. Coral reef yonder—*very* narrow opening." So it was, being the little wooden door in the grove wall. "Look out, all of you,—ship's going down,—save what you can,—we'll have to swim ashore. Captain, you make yourself scarce, please." Nurse slipped behind a tree, laughing too much to stand still. Even Chenda was sufficiently excited by this time to lie down and creep through the doorway, while the others flung themselves into various contortions, supposed to express battling with the billows. Gerard slipped in timidly last of all, on hands and knees.

And then the poor wrecked voyagers, exhausted with toil and danger, sat upon the mossy ground, and gazed about in silent dismay.

CHAPTER XVI.

EXPLORING.

"DREADFUL thing, messmates! Here we are on a desert island,—two thousand miles from land," began Vernon, in a melancholy voice.

"But, Vernon, we haven't explored yet. How can we tell that it is a desert island till we have explored?" asked Flossie.

"Splendid! I forgot all about exploring. Come along!" exclaimed Vernon, starting up, and leaving his load on the ground behind him.

"But you are in such a hurry," laughed Flossie. "We ought first to examine what we have saved from the wreck, and talk over things a little, and Elsie must be frightened and cry,—and—and——"

Flossie left the rest to the actors' imagination, but threw herself heartily into the inspection of rescued goods. Edric gravely pulled out his pocket book, which had somehow escaped wetting, and wrote down a list of their possessions on the spot. The young islanders congratulated themselves highly on the goodly store of provisions they had

brought ashore, and two or three began to suffer severely from the pangs of hunger.

"But it won't do to eat up all we have directly, or we shall be hungry before evening,—I mean before a ship comes to take us off," said Flossie.

"And it is pretty early still, isn't it?"

"Twelve," said Edric, pulling out his little silver watch. "What an age we have been, making ready!"

"We shall just have time to explore over our island before dinner," said Vernon. "At least, if it *is* an island, and not a very big one. Come, Chenda. We'll rig up a tent by-and-by."

But Chenda was annoyed at the way in which Flossie's suggestions were followed, and seating herself in the swing, drew out her work.

"No, I am tired. I mean to stay here. And Willa can stay with me."

Poor Willa looked anything but charmed at the proposal. "O Chenda, exploring is such fun."

"Then you can go without me."

No,—Willa could not make up her mind to that. And something of a shade fell on the little party.

"If Chenda and Willa would rather sit here, suppose we go and explore without them," said Flossie. "Gerard might stay quietly with them too, because he ought not to walk much. We'll pretend they are too tired to come with us."

"But suppose the savages come and eat them all up?" demanded Elsie, dancing about.

"Oh, never mind that," said Flossie. "We needn't pretend that there is danger of any such thing. Gerard, we're going to make believe that you are very strong and brave, and we shall leave you to guard the provisions and Chenda and Willa."

"That child! Nonsense," said Chenda.

"It is only pretence, Chenda,—to make him happy," whispered Flossie. "Look, Gerard,—I've brought a little bow and arrows with me,—I mean, I have saved them from the wreck. Let me see how you can shoot."

Gerard's eyes shone with delight at the new toy, which Flossie had hunted out from some forsaken drawer. They left him seated on a stool, aiming carefully at the trunk of a tree about three yards distant, and occasionally missing it. Chenda and Willa packed themselves neatly into the swing, side by side, and took to fancy-work,—poor Willa looking rather pitiful the while. And the other four,—Vernon, with his pop-gun, taking the lead, and Edric, with his wooden sword, bringing up the rear,—set off in search of adventures.

It was delightful to roam through the old grove, every inch of which was familiar to them, and to pretend that they had never been near it before. It was delicious to imagine that the elms were palms,

and the oaks bread-fruit trees, and the sparrows parrots, and the bushes a mighty jungle. Never mind if the bushes were few, and jungles were not found on coral-islands. What if a tiger were crouching under that lilac-bush? Never mind if tigers likewise could not be found in such a place. No need to be too particular. It was charming to imagine danger in every sound,—to fancy every bit of dried stick a venomous serpent, and to hear the growl of a lion in every murmur of the breeze. In fact, Vernon bagged so many lions, and Edric fought hand-to-hand encounters with so many tigers, that the only difficulty was to know what to do with the skins, the imaginary weight of which caused Vernon to stagger and gasp for breath. Elsie's suggestion, that they should be buried, and left till required, was immediately acted upon. Only the four pairs of hands were not greatly improved in hue by acting as spades,—for the digging was real, if the skins were not.

The circuit of the island having been nearly made, a mighty river was discovered flowing in the muddy little haw-haw, at the foot of the grove. Nothing would satisfy the young explorers, short of climbing down the bank, and dipping their brown hands into a browner puddle. Alligators and sharks were supposed to abound, and Edric's sword was called into use, for the purpose of cutting off a few more heads, each at a single blow. At length, having

met untold dangers, and performed wonders of valour, the explorers joined their companions on the sea-shore.

Raptures of delight at finding them untouched by wild beast or savage, were broken in upon unexpectedly. Gerard was still upon his stool aiming as contentedly as ever at the massive tree-trunk. Suddenly one of the three arrows, which had served for so many shots, glanced off and bounded feebly against Vernon's hand. Vernon happened to be looking in that direction, and was therefore able to distinguish the blow from the flap of a falling leaf. It was too good an opportunity to be neglected. He flung himself upon the ground, with a succession of groans, which might have proceeded from Mount Etna itself, professing to have received a desperate wound. The others, in high glee, crowded round, suggesting remedies innumerable, "Tie it up in rag." "No, put it in splints." "Get a dock-leaf." "As if dock-leaves grew on a coral island." "Well, call it anything you like; let's find a grand name." "Pacific anti-poison leaf." "Cover his hand with mud out of the haw—river, I mean." "Put him to bed, and give him no food."

Vernon's groans grew louder at the latter suggestion, and all at once a sob from behind struck upon Flossie's ear. She turned instantly, to find poor little Gerard in a state of dire distress, fully believing he had half killed his brother.

"I didn't mean—oh, I didn't mean to hurt him. O Flossie, do let us go home—do call Nurse. O Mamma! what will Mamma say?"

Flossie was frightened at his long gasps, and put her arms round him. "Gerard, dear, don't cry. It is nothing but a bit of fun. Vernon is all in play. Vernon, do stop,—please do."

Vernon's groans made it difficult to reach his understanding, but the moment he took in the real state of the case he sprang to his feet, and a marvellously sudden cure was effected.

"Hallo, Gerard! you don't say you are actually weeping salt tears for a bit of nonsense? Don't you know we're all at play? Look here—dreadful wound, isn't it?"

The soiled sunburnt hand was reassuring. Gerard's sobs grew fainter.

"And now don't you think it is time for dinner?" asked Flossie. "*I* am hungry enough for anything."

"I could eat a boiled alligator whole on the spot, scales and all," boasted Vernon.

"You had better say a roasted elephant at once," responded Edric. "Come, we'll take a basket each, and unpack—no, there are only three."

"And this one is for tea," said Flossie, laying it aside.

"Why not open it now?" enquired Chenda of the boys.

"No, no—nonsense, Chenda. We shall want the fun of that by-and-by. Now for number one."

Shouts and exclamations of various kinds broke from the merry little party, as the contents of the basket appeared.

"A table-cloth! Like Nurse to think of *that*," said Vernon. "Otherwise we'd have spiders walking into the eatables. Heigho! what a splendiferous pile of sandwiches! Nurse's sandwiches are always first-rate."

"I helped her to cut them," softly put in Flossie.

"You little witch! I thought nobody was to know anything beforehand,—but we might have guessed you would be the favoured one."

"Nurse had no right to hide things from us, and tell Flossie," said Chenda, flushing.

"Nurse has a right to anything, when she gives us such a feast as this," said Edric, lifting a tempting fruit-tart from its wrappings. "Flossie is like her own child. Besides, I should like to see you turn out such sandwiches as these."

"Anybody can cut sandwiches," said Chenda.

Edric shrugged his shoulders. "Anybody can eat them. The cutting is a different matter."

"Well, I don't suppose Flossie really helped. She was only prying into secrets."

The boys looked curiously at Flossie, but she did not even lift her eyes. A little quiver of her

lips was all that betrayed the fact of her having heard. Gerard crept close to her side, and she felt him presently squeezing her hand, with a loving gesture, which he was wont to keep for his mother alone, as a general rule.

"You are polite, I must say," observed Edric. "What had you to do with them, Floss?"

"Nurse cut the bread-and-butter and meat, and I made them up."

"Well done, Floss!"

"But I didn't *cut* them, you see," added Flossie calmly. "See—here are knives and forks and salt and mustard. What is in the other basket?"

"Chicken bones," cried Elsie. "Oh, there is a merrythought sticking out, and a drumstick."

"And a cold white pudding in a shape, something like blanc-mange," added Willa. "Six hard-boiled eggs,—why how did Nurse get *them* done in time?"

"They were hot when she put them in," said Flossie.

"There! you see Flossie knows all about the whole," remarked Chenda, with an injured air.

"Where is the harm?" said Edric. "Do give over that sort of nonsense, Chenda. Why didn't Nurse give us a seventh egg?"

"I mustn't eat them," said Gerard's little voice.

"That makes all straight. Whew, here we come to seven rolls of bread,—plates,—mugs,—bottles of

water. She hasn't forgotten anything. Cheese-cakes,—that's capital."

"Nothing else, is there?" asked Willa.

"Doesn't seem much need for anything else. Now for a spread! Where shall we lay the cloth?"

That point being quickly settled, and the viands suitably arranged, the young desert-islanders set to work, and never stopped till table-cloths, cups, and empty plates alone remained to tell the tale of what had been.

And then followed the "rigging" of a tent, by hanging shawls from the lower branches of a tree; making a good hour of hard work and merry laughter.

CHAPTER XVII.

UNDER THE ELM.

By this time folks were growing tired. Vernon suddenly recollected that the green signal-flag had never been hoisted, but professed himself too much fatigued now to repair the mistake. Flossie thought it mattered less, as she secretly felt sure she had heard the faint creak of the shrubbery door more than once. Nurse no doubt had satisfied her anxieties long ere this.

By Chenda's wish she and Willa again took possession of the swing, where they rocked sleepily to and fro. Edric pulled out his book. Vernon vanished into the tent, laid himself there upon the grass, and began the interesting occupation of teasing Elsie. Flossie, after a moment's thought, found Gerard close to her side, and took his hand in her own.

"Come, we'll go for a little walk," she said softly. "You and I will explore, Gerard."

But they did not find any lions or tigers; perhaps they were both too tired. They only walked

steadily on, till they reached a massive old elm tree, with a ridge of mossy ground below it, exactly fitted for a seat. There Flossie sat down, and pulled the little boy to her side.

"What shall we do now, Gerard?"

"I like this," said Gerard, nestling close to her, with wistful upraised eyes. "Flossie——"

"Yes, darling!"

"I think I love you most in the world, except Mamma. I do wish you loved me like I love you."

"So I do, Gerard,—ever so much."

Gerard shook his head distrustfully.

"Why Gerard, what do you mean? Why don't you think I love you?"

"You said so once,—a long while ago," said Gerard, with a little half-sob. "O Flossie, I wish——"

"I said so! Gerard, what *do* you mean?"

"Yes, once," whispered Gerard,—"when they pulled out your things on the floor; and you—you said—you hated us all."

"O Gerard! don't you know I was in a passion? It was very, very wrong of me, but it wasn't true. You don't mean to say you have always thought of that since. Oh, I am so sorry."

"Then you do love me?" said Gerard. "I'm so glad. And will you tell me more about your secret, Flossie? I want *so* to be like what you said."

"Don't you think you are yet?"

Gerard shook his head. "I can't; I don't know how. Flossie, tell me more."

Was Flossie's Master giving her another little bout of work to do for Him? Flossie's heart bounded at the thought. She was getting so to love the sweet service of this gentle loving Master. For a moment she sat and thought.

"Gerard, I wonder whether you would like to hear a little part out of a letter from Hugh that I had lately."

"I don't mind," said Gerard: "I like you to speak. But I'll listen."

"You know I always tell Hugh everything," said Flossie slowly. "And I told him what you wanted—that day up in the garrets. You don't mind, do you, Gerard? Was it wrong of me?"

"No, I don't think so," said Gerard soberly. "Tell me what he says, Flossie,—please do."

"I'll find the place directly,—somewhere down this second sheet. Yes, here it is:—

"'The thought of the service which my darling Flossie has joined, is a great happiness to me. Dear child, I often think you and I were too much all-in-all to each other, and so our Master parted us, that we might cling to Him more closely, and that my Flossie might become His little handmaid

"'And it may be that He has put my Flossi where she is, just because He *wants* a little hand

maid there, to do some kind of work for Him. What you say about little Gerard makes me think this. Suppose—I do not say it is so—but *suppose* our Master wants little Gerard to be His servant, and wants His little handmaid Flossie to bring him to His feet. I am quite sure of the first, and I think the second likely.

"'Look and listen earnestly for signs of what you are to do, and keep very close to your Master's side, that He may give you His commands. Perhaps, Flossie, you will say it is so hard to keep close. So it would be if *you* had to do the work. But all you have to do is to throw yourself altogether on the mighty strength of our Lord Jesus, and trust *Him* to keep you by His side. And the moment you feel yourself getting away, don't wait for anything, but look up, and tell Him of your danger, and pray Him to hold you fast. And He will do it! You only have to believe that He will, and trust His love.

"'Tell little Gerard what a loving Master you have found Him, how strong and how tender. And tell him never to be afraid that he will have to do too much. If the Master wanted Gerard to do hard work for Him, He would make Gerard strong enough first. Sometimes He gives His little servants nothing to do, but only a load of pain or weakness to carry, and all He tells them to do is to stand and wait patiently, and try to

smile for His sake. He likes to see His little servants and handmaids smiling, whether they stand still or run, whether they do work for Him, or only hold burdens for Him. The great thing is to love Him, and trust Him, and tell Him every trouble, and do brightly just what He commands.'"

"Do you think He has given me a little load to carry, Flossie? But perhaps I'm not His little servant."

"You are going to be now."

"But if He has given me the load first," said Gerard.

"Then perhaps, when you are His little servant, He will tell you to smile over it."

Gerard sighed.

"And He will make you able, you know, if you ask Him. I think He will put a smile upon your face."

"Flossie, does *He* make you able not to get into passions now with Chenda, when she is horrid?"

"I want to love her. I have asked,—and—I do think He is doing it," whispered Flossie. "And if you see me go and get into a pet again, Gerard, you'll know it is because I have let go His hand that day, instead of clinging on tight. He keeps me clinging, as long as I go on asking Him."

Gerard put up his face for a kiss. "I love you ever so much."

"So do I you, darling."

Then a pause.

"Flossie, wouldn't I be tired, standing always?"

"If you are, you'll sit down. Besides, Hugh doesn't mean you'll really stand. He only means it is like that,—you know,—like a servant."

"If I wasn't a little servant, Flossie, maybe the Lord Jesus would carry me. I'd rather be His child—like what Mamma sometimes says."

"But then, couldn't you be both?" asked Flossie thoughtfully. "I suppose if we belong to Him we must be His children. But it is so nice to be His little servant too, and do what He wants to have done."

"I didn't know I could be both," said Gerard wonderingly.

"Why, Gerard,—yes. I'll tell you what it is like. I am Hugh's sister, and I am sure I am his child too, and yet I was his handmaid,—because I loved him so much, that I was always trying to do things for him." Tears were in Flossie's eyes as she spoke. "I think it is like that, Gerard. And the moment I was tired or unhappy, Hugh seemed to forget all about my being a handmaid, and took me up in his arms to comfort me, as if I were his child. And when he had things to talk about to me, then I wasn't his handmaid, but his little sister-friend. And I used to wait upon Hugh always, because I loved it; but when I was miserable at his going away, then he just put me

in his own chair, and waited on me instead, and did everything for me. O Gerard, I do think it is all just like that with the Lord Jesus."

Gerard was drinking in every word, with eager wide-open eyes. "Flossie, I do wish I was His little servant."

"Why, I think you are, perhaps."

"I don't know how. What did you do?"

"I told Him——"

"Told whom?"

"The Lord Jesus."

"Told Him what?" The little voices were very low and reverent.

"Just that I wanted to be His little handmaid, and couldn't make myself so. But I think I gave myself to Him,—and I think He *took* me," said Flossie softly.

"Took you where?"

"Took me—to belong to Him. Just as if I gave you a present, and you were to take it and use it."

"And didn't you love Him ever before that?"

"Sometimes I thought I did, and sometimes I thought I didn't. It wasn't like this. I wasn't His little handmaid."

"Sometimes I think I love Him too,—when Mamma talks," said Gerard; "but I don't know; and I can't ask anybody except you; and I want to be sure,—as sure as can be."

"I'll tell you what I would do if I were you," said Flossie, pressing one of his hands. "I'd go quite away all alone, Gerard, and kneel down, and just ask first to be made to pray aright. And then I'd tell all straight out in a whisper to the Lord Jesus,—every bit,—what I wanted, and what I couldn't do, and what I had to beg Him to do for me. And He'll do it. He will do it, Gerard, because He has promised, you know."

"I'll try," said little Gerard quietly. "Will He make me His little servant that very minute?"

"I don't know. Maybe not. Hugh says that sometimes He makes us ask things two or three times first. But He always—always answers."

"And if He does really want me for His little servant, and wanted you to tell me,—like what Mr. Silverthorn says,—perhaps He won't be long," Gerard added wistfully.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN ACCIDENT.

"WHAT an age you've been gone, Floss! Where can you and Gerard have been?"

"Sitting under a tree most of the time," said Flossie brightly. "What are you all doing here?"

"Yawning and lamenting your absence,—especially Chenda," said Vernon. "I say, Edric, put away that book, old fellow, and don't moon over it any longer. Flossie hasn't had her promised swing to-day."

"Oh, I don't want it just now," said Flossie hastily, foreseeing difficulties.

"Why not? You'll turn out a coward, Floss!"

"No, I am not frightened, but I would rather wait till another time."

"Why, Flossie isn't frightened of swings?" said Elsie.

"My dear, you'd better reserve your opinion for things within reach of your understanding," said Vernon patronizingly. "Come, Chenda—Willa—

you've sat in the swing nearly the live-long day. Get out."

Willa sprang to the ground with alacrity, having been kept there much against her inclination. Chenda did not move.

"Flossie has no right to the swing."

"Right or no right, I promised her a swing to-day, and she shall have it," said Edric, putting his book in his pocket. "Come now, Chenda, don't be obstinate. You can't possibly want to sit there the whole day."

Vernon shook the ropes as a further gentle intimation, and then proceeded to tilt up the seat,—but Chenda held on resolutely.

"I say, this won't do. You hold your tongue, Flossie,—it's for Chenda's own good that we won't let her behave like the dog in the manger. Will—you—get—out—if you please?"

Shake after shake, more and more determined, accompanied each word.

"Vernon, you will make me fall. You will hurt me. I shall send Willa for Nurse."

"Willa shan't go. And do you suppose Nurse would support you?"

Edric at this moment settled the question by a dexterous little twitch of the swing on one side, whereby Chenda lost her balance, and fell forward into his outstretched arms. He placed her on the ground, before she had time to struggle, and

lifted the unwilling Flossie into her place. Vernon caught the swing, and rushed backwards, holding it high with his hands.

"Now then, Chenda, clear off, or you'll come to grief."

"I shan't. Flossie has no right to swing. I shall stay where I am."

"You'd better be off. I'm going to let go. One —two—three—get along, Chenda."

"I shan't. You won't dare——"

Edric moved towards her, to make use of more forcible persuasives than words. Vernon, however reckless he might be, had of course not the slightest intention of injuring his sister. But at this instant the heavy swing slipped unexpectedly from his grasp, and went back with a rush,—the hard iron-bound corner striking violently against Chenda's face, as she half sat, half knelt sullenly upon the ground, just in its path, where Edric had placed her.

The shock of the concussion flung Chenda backwards and over, and together with the horror of the accident fairly unseated Flossie, who came down full-length upon the grass. She was up again instantly, and hurried, pale and trembling, to the side of Chenda, who was struggling to a sitting posture, with frightful screams. Blood literally poured from her face, and Flossie's handkerchief was almost instantly soaked through. Willa's sobs and Gerard's breathless terror could receive no attention.

"Call Nurse! oh, call Nurse!" said Flossie in agony. "Don't wait,—Vernon, not Edric. O Vernon, do make haste! She is dreadfully hurt! Oh, how could he?—how could he?"

"If only she had moved out of the way," said Edric hoarsely. "He didn't mean to let you slip, Flossie. I saw that. Do you think she is very bad?"

"I can't see: I don't know. Chenda, darling, won't you let me look?"

But Chenda only buried her face in the handkerchief which Willa handed to her, and uttered moaning cries. The red stream came soaking through again instantly, and even Elsie's wondering curious gaze changed into tears. Flossie did not cry. She was as white as a sheet, but she sat on the grass bravely trying to support Chenda, and asking for fresh handkerchiefs from the others as required, during those long slow minutes of waiting.

"Here's Nurse! Oh, here she is!"

It was a load off all their minds. Poor Nurse was terribly distressed, but with much presence of mind she had delayed long enough to bring with her rags and lint, and a can of hot water. It was with great difficulty that Chenda could be persuaded to let her face be seen, but at length she gave way, and the whole of one side was found to be terribly cut and bruised.

A small jagged edge of the iron had barely missed entering the eye, and had inflicted a long deep gash, which bled profusely. The poor little face so fair and pretty but ten minutes before, had suffered to that degree that Chenda's own mother would scarcely have recognised it. And at the sounds of distress from all around, Chenda's screams broke forth with redoubled violence.

"Oh, what shall I do? Oh, what shall I do? Oh, it is dreadful, dreadful pain. O Nurse, what shall I do? Will my face ever be right again?"

She was turning sick and faint with loss of blood, and grasped at Flossie, unable to see anything clearly. Nurse hurriedly despatched Edric for the doctor, and Vernon for two or three more servants. Then, with the utmost care, she bathed the wounds,—Chenda's cries gradually fading into half-unconscious moans. And the other servants having now arrived, the poor child was carried indoors, and laid upon her bed.

It was strange how everybody seemed to turn to Flossie for comfort, and how nobody but Flossie seemed able to give quiet help. Poor Nurse was half distracted with foreboding and self-reproach, and really was rendered almost unable to watch by Chenda's side, until Flossie whispered gently to her, how just the same might have happened if she had been sitting in the grove herself all the time. Vernon was utterly miserable, and cried like a girl

at the thought of his mad carelessness, refusing to let any one speak to him, till Flossie begged a cup of tea from somebody, and brought it to his side with her little trembling hands. And then, when she had made him drink it, and had cheered him up a little, she hastened to poor terror-stricken Gerard, who had crept shuddering and gasping into a corner, with pitiful sobs for "Mamma! Mamma!"

Flossie did not like the strange blue-grey look in his face, nor the way in which he panted,—"I can't breathe—oh,—it hurts so!" And when the doctor came, she slipped into Chenda's room, and whispered to Nurse, "I don't think Gerard is well. Can't he be seen to?"

Nurse's face of alarm showed Flossie that she had not been unreasonably anxious. "Miss Flossie, will you stay here with the doctor? can you, my dear? I daren't be away from Master Gerard. If he was to die——" And then, seeing that she had gone too far in her flurry, she added, "There, there,—I'm stupid to talk like that, but I don't seem to know what I'm saying."

And then she hurried away, without waiting for an answer. The housekeeper was in the room, and Flossie took up her station near the bed, watching eagerly for little opportunities of usefulness. Once the doctor turned with a smile, and said, "Why, what a capital little maid you are! I shouldn't mind having you for my own."

Ah, but Flossie was the little handmaid of Another! And in all this hurry and sorrow and fear she had a strange calm feeling of rest down below, as if that dear MASTER were holding her hand, and gently telling her what she was to do. Now and then she whispered,—"Oh, please help me." And Flossie was helped.

"Where has Nurse gone?" asked the doctor.

"I think Gerard isn't well," said Flossie.

"Ha!" and Flossie thought he looked grave. "I'll take a look at him before I go."

Then, in a few more minutes, he said cheerfully,—"There! now we shall do, I hope. How do you feel, my dear?"

"It hurts all the time—very much," said Chenda. "I can't bear my face being all done up like this."

"Ah, you must not mind that for a while. You feel stronger, don't you,—not quite so ill?"

A sob answered him.

"Oh, come,—you mustn't be down-hearted. See here,—what a nice little damsel you have to wait upon you."

"Who?"

"Flossie Silverthorn, to be sure. She and I are old friends, only she hasn't troubled me often in her life-time. I never knew she was such a good little nurse.

"I don't want Flossie." said Chenda languidly

yet with distinctness. "Oh, it *does* hurt so Please, will my face be all right soon?"

"We mustn't think of beauty yet awhile," said the doctor jokingly. "It will take a little while for those cuts to heal, you know."

Then he beckoned Flossie to the door, and whispered, "Keep her very quiet, my dear,—no excitement."

"Flossie, what did the doctor say?" asked Chenda sharply, as she came back.

"He wants you to be quiet."

"I can't. How can I? My face hurts dreadfully, and my head aches all through. Oh dear! Flossie, I don't want you here. You can go."

"But I am going to be your little nurse now, Chenda darling, so you must not send me away."

Chenda began to moan and sob again, instead of answering. Presently she muttered, "I want a pocket-handkerchief. Not *you*. Bains can."

But the housekeeper was sitting, tearfully helpless, at the foot of the bed, and never offered to move. So Flossie went softly to the chest of drawers, and began to hunt for what was wanted.

"Not that chest,—how stupid you are!" said Chenda, hearing the direction of the sounds, though her face was so swollen and bandaged up that even the eye on the uninjured side was almost useless. "The bottom shelf of the wardrobe,—right side."

But Flossie stood like one aghast. For at this moment, in her search, she had pulled forward some of the back contents of a deep drawer, and with them—Flossie could hardly believe her eyes,—yes, there it lay,—her lost letter to Hugh!

CHAPTER XIX.

FORGIVEN AND FORGIVING.

'WHERE'S the handkerchief, Bains?" demanded Chenda querulously. "Oh dear! the pain is so bad."

Flossie started at the sound of her voice, and flushed crimson. She put the folded letter silently into her pocket, went to the wardrobe, found the handkerchief, and carried it to the bedside.

"Flossie, I didn't tell you to get it," said Chenda, recognising step and touch. "I don't want to have you meddling in my drawers."

Reason enough, Flossie might have thought, but she was really too bewildered at the moment to think anything steadily. It was a relief to hear footsteps outside, and to see Mrs. Knight and Colonel Marshall come in together.

Very anxious and startled and distressed looked both the faces. Flossie wondered not to perceive Mrs. Marshall as well. But she saw that her own help was no longer needed, and she slipped away, without a word, straight upstairs to her bedroom.

There she took out the letter, and looked at it. Sheet by sheet, it was the same. "How could Chenda do such a thing? oh, how could she? how could she?" sobbed poor Flossie bitterly. "I shall never be able to love her now. It was so very very bad of her. I would rather have had anything else in the world happen to my letter. Oh, how could she? I don't think I ever can forgive her."

Never forgive Chenda! What,—when Flossie's own Master had forgiven her so many many sins against Him,—could Flossie never forgive Chenda this one sin against herself? What of the petition Flossie daily uttered,—"Forgive us our trespasses, *as* we forgive them that trespass against us." Chenda had trespassed against Flossie, and Flossie could not forgive her. Flossie often trespassed against her Master, the Lord Jesus, and needed His forgiveness. Was she going to ask Him from this day to forgive her, *as* she was now forgiving Chenda?

"Oh, no, no, no!" and Flossie threw herself down by the bedside on her knees, in sorrowing penitence, and her angry thoughts gave place to pleading prayers for victory. Flossie could not conquer for herself, but her Master could conquer for her,—ay, and Flossie felt sure that He would.

Some little time later the door opened, and Nurse came in, to find Flossie seated at the window.

"Miss Flossie——"

"O Nurse, tell me how she is now."

"My dear, nobody seemed to know where you was. What are you after up here?"

"I wanted to be alone a little," said Flossie quietly. "Is Chenda better?"

"She isn't like to be better yet awhile," said Nurse.

"Nurse, do you think her face will get quite right again soon?"

"I don't know, Miss Flossie. That's the thing. The doctor don't seem to fear danger to life with her,—but it'll be a sore trial to her Papa and Mamma if her poor face is all scarred and marked."

"Oh, poor Chenda! O Nurse, I do hope it won't. It wouldn't matter if it had been me, but Chenda is *so* pretty, it would be such a pity."

Nurse looked very glad that it was not Flossie.

"But there's scarce been time yet for thinking about it," she said. "We've had our heads that full of poor little Master Gerard."

"Gerard! Oh, how is he?" asked Flossie, with sudden recollection.

"He's better," said Nurse, with a deep sigh. "I didn't think once that he would be,—nor the doctor neither."

"Would be what?"

Flossie's startled look of half-comprehension made Nurse hesitate.

"Gerard hasn't been ill, has he, Nurse?" asked Flossie.

"He has had a bad sort of attack. He gets 'em if he's frightened, they say."

"But you don't mean——"

"I didn't think he'd have got over it," said Nurse gravely. "He was as nigh gone as could be,—seemed to me. Poor Mrs. Marshall! she just dotes on that child. You see, Miss Flossie, he never is well, and never can be. There's been something wrong about his heart ever since he was born, and he might die any time. That's why we have to be so careful of him. But there!—what am I after, telling you this?" exclaimed Nurse with sudden self-recollection. "Don't you speak of it again to any one, Miss Flossie. I'd no business to let you know. Miss Chenda and Miss Elsie don't."

"I'll take care," said Flossie dreamily. And then a voice was heard calling, and Nurse went away, and Flossie sat like one stunned.

"Might die any time." The words rang in her ears. That was what Gerard had meant, when he said he should never be a man. Poor little Gerard! Oh, how terrible for his mother, and for all who belonged to him; far more so for others, indeed, than for little Gerard himself.

She did not cry over what Nurse had said. There was something too sad and solemn about it for

tears. It made her feel very pitying and tender towards little Gerard and his poor mother. She felt as if she would have done anything in the world for either of them.

The next few days were busy ones to Flossie, so busy that lessons had to be almost laid aside. Mrs. Marshall could not spare her to the school-room; for Gerard was weak and poorly, and might not be left alone; and when his mother had to be absent, he never seemed happy unless Flossie was by his side. And Chenda suffered a great deal, and was very fretful and exacting. At first she tried to send Flossie away, but after the first day she turned quite round, and began to make use of her, and to order her about, in a way that Flossie found it very hard indeed to bear patiently. But she was patient, much more than she knew herself, much more patient outwardly than she felt inwardly.

One evening, some days after the accident, Chenda was lying on the sofa in her bedroom. She had not been downstairs yet, and one side of her face was still all plastered up, and bearing the strange colours of fading bruises. Flossie had been with her nearly all the afternoon, running errands and reading story-books aloud, for Chenda was not yet allowed to try using her eyes. She had suffered a great deal from weakness in them.

Flossie had been absent now a little while, how-

ver, and all at once Nurse too left the room. Elsie was the only little attendant left, and Chenda asked suddenly,—

"Is nobody here but you, Elsie? Are you quite sure?"

Elsie peered round the curtains of the bed to convince herself that some one was not in hiding beyond.

"No, nobody," she said. "What do you want?"

"You are not to tell. I'm just going across to those drawers."

"Oh, don't, Chenda,—you'll turn giddy!"

"I shan't! Hold your tongue, Elsie, and mind you don't tell tales."

Chenda stood up with difficulty, and caught at the sofa-arm for support. Loss of blood, and two or three days of fever following, had pulled her down very much, and she had not yet attempted more than walking from the bed to the sofa, with the help of Nurse's arm.

"You can't," said Elsie. "Do let me call somebody. Or, can't I get the thing for you?"

"No, I want to do it myself."

Chenda tottered rather than walked across the room, and had to ask her sister's help in opening the drawer. Elsie gazed, with wide-open eyes, while she searched hurriedly in the back and front, muttering, "Where can it have gone? I thought——"

"What is it, Chenda?"

Chenda made no answer, but went on moving the things.

"Can't you find it? How tiresome! Flossie, Chenda has lost something out of this drawer. I wish you'd help her." For Flossie had just come in.

The two girls' eyes met—Flossie's and Chenda's. And they understood one another. Flossie knew what Chenda was looking for. Chenda saw that Flossie knew, and she cowered guiltily, trembling, and leaning on the open drawer.

"Elsie, I'm going to stay here now. You can go and play. I'll see after Chenda."

Elsie did not like the constraint of sick-rooms, and bounded gladly away.

"Chenda, you must not stand here," said Flossie quietly. "Come back to the sofa. You ought to have asked somebody else to find what you wanted."

Chenda pushed away the offered helping hand, and tottered back alone. Flossie drew the light quilt over her, and arranged her pillows,—thinking in her own mind what she had better say. Would it be right, would it be really kind, to pass the thing over, as if she did not care, or did not understand?

"I want to say one thing to you, Chenda," she whispered, kneeling down by the sofa; "I think it was a letter you wanted to find."

No answer.

"I found it one day,—and—took it away."

Silence still. Flossie's heart beat thickly. Must she say more? Had she not made advances enough? She had found no fault. Could she not stop there?"

But what if her Master would will her to say something more,—to go yet farther? Might she not by loving meekness help to win Chenda to Him? It wasn't so hard to forgive her now.

"Chenda darling, I wish you hadn't done it. I do wish you hadn't. It was so hard to feel right at first. But you know I was wrong to write all that about you, and I am glad it didn't go off. Only, I would rather it should have been stopped going in some other way."

"How do you know I have read it?" asked Chenda abruptly.

"I don't know,—only I can't think why else you should have taken it."

"Well,—I did."

Both thought for a minute.

"When did you find it?" asked Chenda.

"The day you were hurt."

"You don't mean—— Flossie, did you know it ever since then?"

She was thinking of the little girl's unselfish kindness towards herself. How many hours Flossie had stayed away from the bright sunshine to

read to her! How patiently and untiringly she had waited upon her! Chenda was touched and moved as she had scarcely ever been before.

"Yes," Flossie answered, and Chenda actually faltered out the unwonted words,—

"I'm sorry!"

"Won't you kiss me, Chenda?"

No more was needed. Flossie's loving-kindness had prevailed. Chenda clung to her, and cried heartily, and the wall of ice between them was broken down for ever. Oh, how glad Flossie felt that she had been kept from uttering any hard or unkind words! They would never have brought such tears of sorrow as Chenda was shedding now.

CHAPTER XX.

ABOUT HUGH.

"I CAN'T think why I don't hear from Hugh," said Flossie mournfully.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry," said Chenda. "I dare say he is busy."

The two little girls were under a spreading elm, in the great sloping field behind the house. Chenda was seated on a fallen tree, busily working. One side of her face was deeply marked by a long red scar; nevertheless its expression was so much more gentle and good-tempered than of old, as to render it far pleasanter to see. Flossie was lying flat upon the grass by her side.

"Hugh is never too busy to write to me."

"Well, but perhaps he is now. What a number of birds! look! how oddly they fly!"

"Caw! caw! caw!" sounded softly through the pleasant air. Flossie gazed up through the green leaves which clustered thickly overhead.

"I wouldn't lie down on the grass like that, Flossie."

"I'm tired."

"What with?"

"Hugh hasn't written for so long."

"Why, that can't make you tired."

"Yes, it does," said Flossie, pillowing a very white little face on her arm. "I wish I knew how he was."

"I think you are as anxious as Mamma is about things," said Chenda. "*I* never worry with fancying what is going to happen."

Flossie sighed quietly.

"It is three o'clock," said Chenda; "and we start at four."

"I wish we weren't going."

"Why, Flossie! It will be delicious. Papa says that dell is lovely."

"Yes, I know; Hugh took me there sometimes."

"Did he? Oh, I suppose he would. I forgot. But Mamma and Gerard are coming too. I should think you would be delighted."

"Elsie or Willa would have liked to go," said Flossie languidly.

"No, they can't, because Papa and Mamma mean to take you. Flossie, how can you be so stupid as not to care to go?"

"Don't tell Aunt Elsie," was the only answer.

"She'll see it fast enough, if you look like that."

Chenda worked on for a while, and the little

figure lay still on the grass beside her. Presently there was a movement.

"Where are you going, Flossie?"

"Indoors."

"What for? I like to have you here with me."

Flossie subsided again, and did not lift her head a second time till Chenda remarked,—

"I want to say something."

"Well!" said Flossie dreamily.

"About that letter,—you know,—that I took. I never did tell you properly that I was sorry, Flossie; but you know I am."

"Yes; you needn't say any more," responded Flossie, aware what an effort this must be to Chenda's proud nature.

"Only it was horridly mean and deceitful. I didn't see how bad it was at the time."

"It's all right now," said Flossie. "It was bad of me to want to write so of you."

The two little girls were silent again, and the bees hummed softly, and the flies buzzed dreamily around, and the cawing of the rooks came harshly from the branches of a neighbouring tree, and the little birds sang or twittered in lazy style, as if they felt too hot for much exertion. And Flossie wondered whether *they* had any sorrow, or knew aught of the pain of parting.

"Now it is time to dress," said Chenda, at length. And Flossie rose and walked heavily after her

through the garden, and went up to her own bedroom.

"Oh dear! I wish I needn't go," sighed Flossie.

But she knew Colonel and Mrs. Marshall meant her to go. It would be of no use to make a fuss by trying to get off.

"And of course they think I like it. And so I should, if only—O Hugh!" and a little sob broke the words. "O Hugh, darling!"

For Hugh's letters had utterly ceased of late. Summer was now far advanced, and for many weeks Flossie had heard nothing, and a dark dread was settling down upon her heart. She felt sure something was wrong. She felt sure also that Colonel Marshall thought the same. His kind manner had grown of late to be full of pity, but that only made Flossie fear the more.

They were going out for a drive this afternoon, a longer one than usual. Chenda and Flossie and Gerard were to accompany Colonel and Mrs. Marshall. A certain very pretty dell at some miles' distance was to be their destination, and at any other time Flossie would have been delighted with the idea of a little excursion thither, only she felt now too dull and miserable to enjoy anything.

What a dismal little face it was which met hers in the glass, when she went to put on her hat! Flossie quite started. Was *that* the sort of face for

a little handmaid to carry about in her Master's service?

"But I'm so frightened about Hugh, and so tired," pleaded Flossie.

But Hugh said that the Master liked His little handmaids to smile. How easy it had been to talk to Gerard about smiling over *his* burden,—poor little Gerard, who had such a heavy burden to bear!—and how patiently he had smiled over it too, of late! Here was a small load of weary suspense laid upon Flossie, and the little handmaid was murmuring at having to lift it. Why should not Flossie go to the old sweet never-failing resource—down on her knees at her Master's feet? "Pray! Pray! Tell JESUS, and ask Him to help you," a little voice seemed to whisper in Flossie's heart. But she felt so tired, and dull, and unhappy. It did not seem as if she could kneel down and pray just then. It was just like a weight pulling her back when she thought of such a thing. And she did not know how the weight would lessen as she knelt. So she only went languidly on with her dressing, and then laid her head on the window-sill, and murmured, with a heavy sigh,—

"O Hugh, I wish you had written. I do wish you had. If it had only been ever such a little letter, I wouldn't mind. O Hugh, I wish you had. I am so miserable!"

But Hugh could not hear her. Hugh could not comfort or help her.

Soon Chenda came to say that the carriage was waiting. Flossie took up her gloves, and went downstairs. The two grey horses were pawing the gravel impatiently, and Mrs. Marshall was already within, and Chenda just in the act of seating herself. Flossie took the place by her side, and Gerard was accommodated between his father and mother, while Fido frisked and bounded to and fro on the grass. And the next minute they were off.

"Flossie, don't you like going?" asked Gerard, noting the sober face opposite.

"My dear, are you not well?" Mrs. Marshall enquired.

"Yes, thank you," said Flossie, with a quick rush of water to her eyes.

"The child is quite pale;" and Mrs. Marshall exchanged a glance with her husband. Flossie saw it, and her heart sank down, as if it had been made of lead. All through the long drive following she hardly opened her lips to utter a word. The others talked, but Flossie did not know what they said; and Colonel Marshall told some stories, but Flossie hardly listened to them. She was clinging to her trouble, and refusing to look to anything else. Little Gerard gave her some pitiful and wondering glances. He could not quite make out his dear Flossie to-day, and

almost thought she must be naughty, only Papa and Mamma did not seem angry. But perhaps it really was nearer naughtiness than Flossie herself knew.

They came near the end of the drive at last. The road grew narrower and narrower, and presently they found themselves in a lane, with steep banks on either side, where there was scarcely room to get on at all. Gerard looked half alarmed, and squeezed his mother's hand tightly, but her smile brightened him again. And just at that moment, as they reached a spot where a gate upon either side doubled the width of the way, the coachman pulled up.

"Can't go no further, sir. Mr. Silverthorn he always let us stop here, and he walked the rest. Carriage can't turn anywheres else."

"Elsie, can you manage to walk a little?" asked the Colonel.

"O yes, I shall quite enjoy it," Mrs. Marshall answered. "What a pretty place it seems!"

"Wait a minute, before you talk of prettiness. Flossie and I have been here before, and *we* know, —don't we, Flossie?"

Flossie only smiled faintly by way of answer. They all descended from the carriage, and paced on through the narrow green lane. It grew yet narrower as they advanced, and the trees gradually closed in overhead, till the walkers seemed to be

in one long shady bower, with sunbeams creeping softly through the tangled masses of leaves. And all at once they came to the end, and found themselves in the loveliest of little dells, with a tiny stream rushing merrily down its midst, and soft green banks rising on either side, broken by bits of jagged rock, and studded thickly here and there with groups of delicate birch trees.

"O Norman, this is worth seeing indeed!" exclaimed Mrs. Marshall.

"I shall leave you to feast your eyes and ears presently by yourself, while Chenda and Flossie and I take a climb to the top, and look at the view beyond."

"I have seen it," said Flossie. "Mayn't I stay here with Gerard and Aunt Elsie?"

"If you like, my dear. I think a run up the bank would do you good, though."

Flossie did not think so. She felt much more inclined to sit down and mope.

"Well, Chenda and I will go presently, and leave you to protect Aunt Elsie and Gerard. But first, I want your help in this direction. Come, Flossie."

Flossie obeyed, wondering why he should care to retrace his steps so soon. However, on arriving at the carriage, the mystery was solved. Colonel Marshall put his hand under the seat, and brought out three small baskets. He gave one to Flossie,

and kept two himself. Of course he could just as well have carried them all three, if he had chosen, but Flossie knew he kindly wanted to turn away her thoughts from Hugh. Something came into her mind, which she felt too dull to follow out. Was not this a little like the way in which her Master gave her things to do for Him,—small pieces of work, which He could so easily have done without her, and yet which it pleased Him to put into His little maiden's hand?

But Flossie did not care to think about that or anything else of the kind just now. She could not rouse herself at all, and she only paced steadily back by the Colonel's side, and left Chenda to open the baskets.

It was very pleasant to sit by the little running stream, with the breeze rustling in the leaves overhead, and a plentiful supply at hand of thin bread and butter, and little cakes, and greengages. Fido waited close at hand, wagging his tail, and eagerly looking for the portion which he did not fail to receive. And when they had all eaten what they wanted, and had repeatedly dipped two little mugs into the clear water, wherewith to quench their thirst, Colonel Marshall and Chenda went off for a ramble. Flossie still seemed so disinclined to go, that she was left behind.

CHAPTER XXI.

BY THE BROOK.

"MAMMA, tell me a story," said Gerard.

"What about, darling?"

"Something about your little sister, Blanche, Mamma."

"I have told you about her so often, my darling."

"Ah, but Flossie doesn't know. Flossie, Mamma had such a dear little sister, Blanche, ever so long ago, and she died. I wish she hadn't, because I should have liked to know her. Wouldn't you, Flossie?"

"Yes," said Flossie.

"Aunt Netta says I'm so like her. Am I, Mamma?"

Mrs. Marshall sighed. "Very much, my pet."

"Only I'm not ill, like what she was."

"No, quite different," said Mrs. Marshall hastily "Come, don't you think you would like a nice little ramble? Suppose Flossie shows you how the water comes round the corner over there."

"Will you, Flossie?"

"Yes; but Aunt Elsie mustn't walk any more," said Flossie. "I'll take great care of him, Aunt Elsie."

Mrs. Marshall thanked her, and then drew a small book out of her pocket; but instead of reading she only sat upon the shawl which had been spread for her, and looked sadly after the two children as they moved away.

Gerard could never walk and talk at the same time. He let Flossie lead him up by the side of the stream, till they reached the bend of which his mother had spoken. There they sat down side by side upon an arching tree-root, and waited till Gerard's panting breath grew easier.

"Mamma doesn't much want me to speak about her little sister, Flossie.

"Doesn't she, dear?"

"No. Little Blanche died, you know."

"Yes, she died of consumption. Aunt Netta once told me about her."

"Aunt Netta says I'm so like her."

"But, Gerard, people don't die because their faces are like people's who have died."

"No, I didn't mean that. Flossie——" and the little boy paused, and took a good look up into the green leaves overhead, with the blue sky showing between. "Flossie, do you ever *want* to die?"

"I don't know," said Flossie, in a choked voice. "I think—if Hugh died,—I'd want—but it wouldn't be right."

"Wouldn't it?"

Flossie shook her head.

"Then I don't want it," said Gerard calmly. "Only it must be so beautiful up there."

"Up where, Gerard?"

"Up—where Jesus is, you know," said Gerard softly. "I'm His little servant, Flossie. I'm so glad you came here to tell me how."

"O Gerard, I don't feel a bit like being His handmaid to-day."

"But you are," said Gerard.

"I don't know. Oh, I don't feel as if I could wait to know about Hugh. I don't feel as if I could."

Gerard looked wonderingly at her.

"Not if—Flossie—if the Lord Jesus wants you to wait? Can't you then?"

The sweet simple childish words went deep into Flossie's heart. It was not she who took a message to Gerard this time, but Gerard who brought a message for her. Was it in truth a message from the Master's own lips, through His little feeble servant? Did He want her to wait patiently, while she was struggling and declaring she could not wait? The old old cry for help went silently yet passionately up, and Flossie grew more peaceful, hardly knowing how.

"I'm so glad I am His little servant," said Gerard presently. "It is very nice. But I don't think He gives me much to do."

"Hugh said—perhaps He wouldn't," faltered Flossie.

"Not if He didn't make me stronger first. I'm not stronger now."

Flossie hardly knew what to say.

"So I don't think I ever will be a man," said little Gerard placidly. "I can't tell Mamma, because it would make her sorry, but I can tell you. I think I don't want to be a man. Flossie, how old must I be to be a man?"

Flossie hardly understood. Gerard seemed following out some line of thought for himself, with his little thin hand supporting his cheek.

"Edric isn't a man. Mamma says he won't be for years. And he is ever so much older than I am. Flossie, it is a long while——" and a shadow crept over the child's eyes.

"What is, darling?"

"If I have to die just before I'm a man, it will be such a long time first. I don't think I'll be able to go on smiling all that while. It is so hard when the pain is bad."

"You don't ever cry now," said Flossie. "And, Gerard, don't you think, if the Lord Jesus does tell you to keep on long, He'll make you able?"

"But, you said just now you couldn't wait about

Hugh," said little Gerard wistfully, as if impatience on her part were an excuse for impatience on his.

"Ah, but I was wrong. I'm going to try."

"And then—perhaps—perhaps it won't be only just before I'm a man," said Gerard, going back to his own thoughts. "Flossie, why is it wrong to wish—you know what I mean?"

"I don't know. I think it's like being tired of doing what the Lord Jesus tells us,—isn't it, Gerard?"

"Then I won't," said Gerard again. "I'll only think how beautiful it'll be by-and-by. And I won't want it to come sooner than HE wants. Is that right?"

"O Gerard, I think you know more about it than I do," said Flossie sorrowfully. "I've been so cross and wrong lately. And I wish you wouldn't go on talking so about dying."

"I wouldn't if you were Mamma," said Gerard; "but, you know, I don't see the good of not speaking,—because I have to die, haven't I? That's what the doctor meant. And I thought you would like to know that I'm not afraid now. I needn't be, need I?—because, you know, the Lord Jesus does love me, and I've asked Him to wash me—quite white—so often. I'm so glad you came to live with us, to tell me about being a servant. Flossie, what do you think dying is like?"

Flossie looked wonderingly at him. The little shy silent boy had not been wont to talk so freely, even to her.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't think we need to be frightened, though, if we trust Him to take us to heaven."

"I'm not frightened. Flossie, I think I know what it will be like. I think Jesus will come and take me up in His arms, and carry me away. I wonder how long it will take to get to heaven."

"I don't know; I never thought about that."

"I like to think: I'm always wondering about it," said Gerard dreamily. "Only I don't mind how long it will be, because the Lord Jesus will carry me so safely, won't He? Perhaps I shall be there all in a moment. It will be so beautiful, won't it?"

Flossie stroked his hand silently, and smiled back in answer to his smile, without a word Somehow she could not hear him talk so, without feeling inclined to cry. She loved little Gerard very dearly by this time.

All at once there came a pattering of heavy drops upon the leaves overhead, and the next moment Colonel Marshall hurried up. "Why, you chickens," he said, "didn't you hear us calling? So busy talking, were you? Come, see what a black cloud has come over us. I must carry Gerard, if we are to escape a drenching. Make haste,

Flossie! We shall find Mamma and Chenda in the carriage."

Patter, patter, harder and harder, came the drops; but the Colonel went down the dell at a rapid pace, and the carriage was quickly reached. Happily it was one that could be closed, so they all drove home well sheltered from a pelting thunder-shower.

Flossie was the first to enter the door, and Elsie came skipping forward to meet her.

"O Flossie, only think, there's a letter come from China to Papa, not to you; and it isn't Mr. Silverthorn's own handwriting. Oh dear, what a rainy afternoon it is! Why, Mamma, you have had the carriage shut up."

"Reason enough too," said Colonel Marshall, lifting Gerard up the steps. "My dear, go to Nurse, and see if anything is wet and wants changing. Why, Flossie——"

The Colonel was startled, and no wonder, at the face of ashen whiteness which met his glance. Flossie's parched lips literally refused to utter a word, but her dark eyes looked wildly beseeching.

"My dear child, what *is* the matter?"

"She is faint. Come and lie down, darling," said Mrs. Marshall, taking her hand; but Flossie almost snatched it away, and gasped, with a hoarse struggle for utterance,—

"Oh, no! Hugh——"

"Mamma, there's a letter from China, and I told Flossie," explained Elsie, rather alarmed at the effect of her own words. "I didn't know it would make her look so queer."

It was no time to blame Elsie for interference. "Where is the letter?" Colonel Marshall hastily enquired; and on receiving Elsie's answer, he put his hand on Flossie's shoulder, and led her into the study, followed by Mrs. Marshall.

Yes, there it lay, the thin foreign letter, with the Chinese postmark and the strange handwriting. Mrs. Marshall put her arm supportingly round Flossie, for the child was trembling in long agonized shivers from head to foot. Oh, the terrible slowness of those moments, while the Colonel sat down, and opened the envelope, and glanced through the sheet!

"Flossie, my dear," and he drew her closer, but she shrank back, as if touch were unbearable; "Hugh has not been very well. But you must not be too anxious about him. A friend of his writes to tell me."

Flossie's whole face flushed crimson, and then whitened again, but the look of blank horror passed away, and she drew her breath more freely. "Hugh,—Hugh not well," she muttered confusedly. Oh, I thought—I thought—but he isn't *dead!*"

The word was hardly audible, and though Flossie's eyes were dry, Mrs. Marshall's streamed with

pitying tears. The Colonel drew her again within his arms, and this time Flossie did not struggle to be free.

"My dear Flossie, did you think it was going to be that? Dear child, you must not look for troubles till God sends them. Hugh was only ill when the letter was written. God can have made him better before this."

"Wasn't he better yet?" she whispered.

"No, but he soon might be, you know."

She looked silently imploring for more particulars. He hardly knew what to tell and what to withhold.

"He has been doing too much, and the climate has not quite agreed with him, and then he struggled to keep up, when he ought to have begun nursing himself. That has made him worse."

Flossie's dry eyes looked mournfully away. "And I can't nurse him,—I can't do anything for him."

"My little girl can pray. Flossie, you know something of the power of prayer."

Flossie felt utterly hopeless. It seemed to her that this was a trouble so great and sore that she could not possibly bear it,—could not certainly bear it with patience. What if Hugh were to die? A strained white look came over her face at the thought.

"What is it, dearest?" asked Mrs. Marshall.

"Won't you tell me any more?" murmured Flossie. "Will another letter come? Will—will Hugh—be soon——"

"I do not think it will be long before we hear again. And God can very soon make Hugh well, if it is His will."

"If!" Ah, but it was against this "if" that Flossie's whole heart rose up in strong rebellion. She *could* not lose Hugh. He *must* not die.

"Thank you," she whispered, and then she turned away, and went out of the room. And Mrs. Marshall said softly, "Let her go, Norman. Flossie knows where to find help and comfort."

Yes, Flossie knew; but she did not seek either help or comfort this evening where she knew they might be found. She would speak no more to any one of her trouble, not even to Gerard. That would have mattered little, if Flossie had spoken to her Master about it. But she hugged her new burden closely, instead of laying it upon Him. It was no wonder that all that evening, and for some days after, little Flossie went about with a white sad face, feeling as if all joy in life had forsaken her.

CHAPTER XXII.

LEARNING TO WAIT.

"FLOSSIE, you are wasting your time. I cannot have all this idling."

Flossie thought it was very unreasonable of Miss Wilmot to expect her not to waste her time. How could she possibly do anything else just now? She was sitting in a very unhappy attitude at the schoolroom table, with a slate in front of her. And upon the slate was a sum, which Flossie had quite made up her mind would never come right. She did not seem to care much about its doing so, either.

"I cannot have this idling," repeated Miss Wilmot. "I have no wish to be hard upon you, my dear, but it is your Aunt Elsie's desire that you should do your regular lessons. And however hard you may find it to give attention, that is no excuse at all for naughtiness."

Flossie only fidgeted with her pencil, and made no answer. She liked to feel that she was miserable, and that Miss Wilmot was very unkind to expect her to be anything else.

"I will allow you ten minutes more for finishing the sum; after that we shall read history."

Flossie still remained silent, with an injured look on her face. Gerard, who was writing a copy on the other side, glanced across from time to time, half perplexed, half grieved. He did so wish she would do her sum quickly. He was so afraid she would have to be punished for it. He wondered that Flossie seemed almost to have forgotten about being the Master's little handmaid, and smiling in trouble.

"The ten minutes are up. Is your sum done, Flossie?"

"No, Miss Wilmot. It is—so long——"

"Is that the reason it is unfinished?"

Flossie was thoroughly straightforward. She instantly said, "No."

"You acknowledge then that you have been idling?"

"I can't do it."

"Flossie, that 'can't' is not perfectly true. You will not, you mean."

Flossie thought she felt as if she could not, but she said no more.

"You will have to do your sum in play-hours. Now bring your history here. Come, Chenda. The second chapter of Edward the Third's reign."

Miss Wilmot read aloud herself, frequently stopping to ask questions. Chenda and Elsie answered

briskly. Flossie's replies were very wide of the mark.

"What did you say, Flossie? I did not hear. Edward's eldest son was—who?"

"Prince Edward," said Flossie.

"Tell me the title he is known by."

Silence. Flossie's thoughts were in China.

"Elsie, tell me."

"The Black Prince, because he wore black armour."

"Quite right. Flossie, you will lose a mark by this carelessness. Did the Black Prince ever become king?"

"No," said Chenda, "he died before his father."

"Then who succeeded Edward the Third, Flossie?"

Flossie looked vaguely up in Miss Wilmot's face "Succeeded Edward the Third?"

"Yes. Who was king after him?"

"His son."

"Flossie, you are not paying the very least attention. What did Chenda say just now?"

Not having heard, Flossie could not possibly say.

"Did the Black Prince ever become king? I know you know all this."

"N—o," said Flossie.

"Who did in his place?"

"His—his son," said Flossie.

"What name?"

"Edward the Fourth."

"Flossie!"

"I mean, Richard the Third," said Flossie in confusion.

"Worse and worse. You will have a bad mark for history this morning. Chenda, answer me."

"Richard the Second," said Chenda.

Then there was reading again for a few minutes.

"Flossie, tell me the names of the two famous battles which you have been hearing about."

Flossie actually began, "Water—— no, I mean, Agin——"

Miss Wilmot's hand came over her mouth.

"You had better think before you speak. This is wilful carelessness."

"Cressy and Poitiers," said Elsie, in answer to a glance; for Flossie remained silent.

"Who commanded at Poitiers on the English side?"

"The Black Prince," said Chenda.

"What was the name of the French king, Flossie, who was brought prisoner to England?"

Flossie looked about hopelessly.

"That will do," said Miss Wilmot coldly. "I will ask you no more, Flossie, for it is very evident that you do not choose to answer. Go and sit on that chair; and when we go for our walk, you will stay here and do your sum."

Flossie would not show how much she minded

the punishment: for to miss her daily ramble, with Fido by her side, was a real loss. She went proudly to the chair pointed out, and sat motionless until lessons were over.

Yes, until lessons were over, and books were put away, and Miss Wilmot and the children were gone, and Flossie was left alone. And then pride broke down, and Flossie felt how wrong she had been, and how unhappy she was.

Why, oh, why had she acted thus? Why had she shown so much temper and idleness? Surely not only because she was anxious about Hugh. That of itself needed not to make her naughty.

Was it not rather because Flossie had somehow managed to let slip of late the daily waiting upon her loving Master, and receiving of His strength? Was it not because she had been trying, as of old, to walk alone, instead of clinging tightly to His Hand? Ah, no wonder the little handmaid's feet were slipping and faltering.

Flossie felt sorely humbled. She thought of all she had at times said to Gerard. How must such conduct show in his eyes? Far worse than that, Flossie knew how it must dishonour the name of her Master. Ay, and how she must have grieved Him, when He had been wanting her to wait patiently, and to lean upon Him, and she had held back, and refused to obey.

Quick blinding tears came to Flossie's eyes, and

she knelt down by the table, and whispered an earnest prayer. She wanted help so much. It was hard to be patient. She didn't know how she ever *could* bear to lose Hugh. But the Lord Jesus could help her; Flossie knew that. She did so pray that it might not be, and that Hugh might get well. But most of all she prayed that she might be forgiven, and washed quite pure and spotless from every stain. She wanted her Master to keep her close in His arms, and not to let her do wrong.

Flossie felt so helpless, as she went on telling softly all her need to her loving Master, and asking Him to do everything for her. Somehow she thought of those words, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me even as Thou wilt." She did not know how they came into her head, and she forgot just then that she had lately learnt them in a text-book. But they seemed just meant for her at that moment. If only she could say those words about Hugh.

Ah, Flossie could not. She had no strength. She knew she could not keep her own little feet from slipping for one moment. How much less could she make herself lie at her Master's feet, willingly and patiently waiting!

Flossie could not, but there was One who could do it all for her. He could make her able to wait; He could give her strength to look up in His face;

He could hold her safely when danger was near; He could still impatient longings; He could hush angry or pettish words; He could make His little handmaid just exactly what He wanted her to be, if only she was willing that He should do what He liked with her, and was not always struggling after her own way.

"But then I must pray for Hugh to get well,—oh, I must!" said Flossie sorrowfully, as these thoughts came softly through her heart.

Pray, yes. Flossie could have told verse after verse, showing that she might ask for "whatsoever" she needed or desired. Only after each prayer she still might add the sweet words, "Be it unto me even as Thou wilt." For Flossie could not tell what was best for herself or Hugh. Unless it were her Master's will to give her what she asked, Flossie was better without it.

So the little handmaid knelt alone in the quiet room, and told her Master all her trouble, and rolled off upon Him the burden which she had carried so painfully. And when she rose from her knees, she took her tiny text-book out of her pocket, and looked at the little text for the day:

"HIM THAT IS ABLE TO KEEP YOU FROM FALLING."

Flossie's heart glowed. She felt almost joyful: For her Master was able—*so* able—to do just everything that she could not do. Able to make Hugh

well; able to keep her from falling; able to take loving care of them both, always and for ever. Flossie felt that that text would be her very own from that day forward. She could never forget it. It seemed to come to her like a loving word from her Master, just when she did so want help.

The face which met Miss Wilmot on her return was different indeed from the face which Miss Wilmot had left an hour and a half earlier. Flossie's humble apology, and the sight of the finished sum, set all right with her immediately. Miss Wilmot kissed the little girl, called her "dear child," and went rather hastily away. She had just heard something which made her very sorry for Flossie.

And then came dinner. Colonel Marshall looked gravely now and then at the peaceful though serious little face, which had of late been so clouded. He wondered what had caused the change. Somehow it decided him not yet to tell her this news he had had. If she had seemed very anxious and full of enquiries, he might have done so. As it was,—better to wait, and not add needlessly to the child's suspense.

So Flossie heard nothing from him. She did not know of the darkening of the shadow over her. It seemed dark enough to her already. The Chinese mail had arrived some hours earlier than was expected, and the next day Flossie watched the posts eagerly, but no Chinese letter appeared.

And Flossie said nothing. It was hard to see her growing whiter and more silent hour by hour, yet what they had to tell her would not in anywise have lightened the burden.

So the days passed by, sadly and anxiously indeed, but no longer shaded by temper and gloom, as well as sorrow. Flossie waited with quiet patience now.

CHAPTER XXIII.

IN THE TREE-TOP.

IT was a lovely afternoon, and ever since dinner the children had been in the orchard. The boys were free from lessons that day, on account of their tutor's slight illness,—which certainly was no matter of grief to them, whatever the poor man himself may have felt. The girls had been granted a half-holiday likewise, in consideration of the brilliant weather. Summer would so soon be over now, that they ought to make the best of what remained, Nurse declared, and this day they decidedly were making the best of it.

Game after game had been kept up with untiring zeal. Willa as usual formed one of the number, and though Flossie at first found it difficult to take much interest in the fun, yet she was rewarded for her efforts not to seem dull, by becoming gradually as excited and merry as any of them. Gerard was the only one who could not join, but he sat contentedly on the low forked bough where they placed

him, and listened, with a placid smile on his little white face, to the gleeful cries and shouts in which he had no share.

"Oh dear, I can't run any longer, so you must stop," exclaimed Chenda at length, throwing her hat on the grass, and herself by the side of it. "I'm so hot and tired."

"So am I," and "So am I," echoed in two or three other voices, and a number of little figures might have been seen, the next minute, looking up from the midst of rough green couches.

"Flossie, I want to come and lie down by you," said little Gerard. "May I?"

"Don't you think you are best off where you are, Gerard? Because if the grass should be ever so little a speck damp, Aunt Elsie wouldn't like it for you."

"Damp! My dear Floss!" protested Vernon. "Unless you have been watering the orchard half an hour ago, I don't see where the damp is to come from."

"I'll stay here, if Flossie thinks I'd better," said Gerard.

"Shall I come and sit by you?" asked Flossie, springing up, and the next moment Gerard's small hand was squeezing hers lovingly.

"Now then, Floss,—you're high up, and we are all in the position of audience," remarked Vernon. "We request your Majesty to make us a speech

from your throne forthwith,—in other words, to tell us a story."

"Oh, I can't, Vernon."

"She can,—can't she? Make her, Gerard."

'Won't you?" whispered Gerard.

"I'm as hot as can be——" began Flossie.

"Hear! hear!" shouted Vernon. "Her Majesty's begun her speech."

"Now, Vernon!"

"Carry it on, my dear. 'I'm as hot as can be,' quoth the tea-kettle to the saucepan. 'Why don't you get off the fire then?' asked the saucepan. 'Because it's my duty to remain here till you come to take my place,' said the kettle."

Shouts of merriment repaid Vernon for his sally. Gerard looked gravely puzzled. "Why, Flossie, is that a real story?"

"Only Vernon's nonsense," laughed Flossie. "You had better go on with it, Vernon. *I'm* the kettle and you're the saucepan, and I am very hot here, so suppose you come and take my place."

"You're a sharp-witted young damsel, Miss Floss. Now look here,—I vote that somebody says a piece of poetry from the top of a tree."

"Yes,—because that must be you or Edric," said Chenda.

"Flossie's up to climbing a tree any day,—eh, Floss?"

"I know how," said Flossie. "I often used to get up this tree."

"Why, I have never seen you," said Elsie in surprise.

"No,—I didn't care after Hugh went," murmured Flossie, her face falling. "And I'm getting too big."

"Do it just once more," pleaded Elsie and Willa. "It would be such fun. Could you really say a piece of poetry up there?"

Flossie did not see any difficulty in the matter. It was a low rugged wide-branched apple-tree, laden with ripening fruit, and extremely easy of ascent. Stepping daintily from bough to bough, she soon showed her face over the top, glowing and smiling again. Vernon waved his cap in the air, and shouted "Hurrah!" three times vociferously.

"Now then, Floss, give us the 'Battle of the Baltic.' I know you have learnt that."

"No,—'Hohenlinden,'" cried another.

Flossie attempted neither. She was gazing steadily over the tree-tops towards the entrance of the orchard,—gazing as if something strange and unwonted were there to be seen. Her colour came and went in flashes of crimson.

"Floss! what's the matter?"

Flossie's footing was on a broad slanting bough, —not over secure, without the assistance of her

hands. But she suddenly quitted her safe hold of the uppermost bough, and clasped them together, with a breathless gasp.

"Floss! what are you after? Floss, you'll tumble!" shouted Edric, springing forward.

"Oh, no! He—Uncle Norman—is coming—Oh!"

"Flossie, don't be so mad! Keep tight hold," cried Edric, as he swung himself up into the tree. "Has Papa come home? He told us he might be about this time. What is the matter with you?"

For Flossie clutched at him hysterically as he reached her side. "O Edric, take me down—quick—quick."

"Of course I will. Hold tight. Are you giddy or frightened?"

"Oh, no! Oh, take me down. I can't wait. Oh!—it IS Hugh!"

For Colonel Marshall, with a gentleman by his side, appeared below. "Where is Flossie?" a voice asked, and at the same moment Flossie's scream rang through the orchard, with a sound of joy so intense as to be almost pain. Edric really thought she would have flung herself bodily out of the tree, and he had to hold her fast.

"Flossie, don't be wild. Flossie, keep quiet, and I'll get you down."

"Flossie, my darling, don't struggle, or you will fall. Come gently."

The very instinct of obedience to Hugh's voice made her grow calmer, and Edric handed her cautiously downwards. But she was trembling like a little aspen-leaf before she had taken three steps; and when she had almost reached the lowest bough, she literally dropped off into Hugh's arms.

"My precious one, you did not expect to see me."

"O Hugh! how could I? O Hugh,—is it really really you? O Hugh,—dear darling Hugh! I can't believe it one bit," gasped Flossie. "And are you quite well again? And how did you come?"

"I was sent, my darling——"

"How? Who sent you? O Hugh! O Hugh! it is beautiful to have you again."

"Dear child, if I had not come, you would not have had a brother Hugh much longer. Nothing short of that would have brought me."

"But I don't understand. Were you so ill? O poor Hugh,—how dreadful!"

"They little thought I should ever live to see England, when they sent me off,—as little as *I* expected to find Colonel Marshall waiting to give me a father's welcome."

Hugh's voice faltered suddenly, and his eyes were moist.

"And you'll stay now,—you won't go away again. O Hugh, hold me tight,—I want to feel that it is *really* you. It doesn't seem as if you *could* be back.

You're not ill now, are you, Hugh? I don't like to see you so very thin."

"Never mind, Flossie,—we shall soon build him up among us," said Colonel Marshall cheerfully. "He shall have the best of nursing."

Hugh shook his head. "I don't need nursing. Sea-air has done wonders, and English air will do yet more. Flossie would not call me thin now, if she had seen me seven weeks ago."

"But, Uncle Norman," said Flossie suddenly, with a half-bewildered look,—"did Hugh say,—I don't understand,—did you go to meet him?"

"What did you think I left home for, Flossie?"

"It was business, Aunt Elsie said."

"And that was the business."

"But how did you guess Hugh was coming?"

"I did not like to sadden you needlessly, my little Flossie. I had a letter one day, saying that Hugh was to be sent off by the next mail,—as the last remaining hope. But that hope was faint. I thought I should have had sad news to bring you back,—instead of Hugh himself."

Flossie pressed her face into Hugh's sleeve for a moment, hardly able to think calmly of what that would have been.

"But now I think you and Hugh would like a little quiet time together before dinner," said Colonel Marshall, lifting Gerard from the fork of the tree where he was seated. "Take him to

the library, Flossie. That is your favourite room, I know."

Flossie felt herself perfectly in a dream. She could hardly believe it was her own real self walking through the garden by the side of her real brother Hugh. Oh, how very very good God had been to her! How much more He had given her than she deserved! Flossie's heart swelled with thankfulness and joy.

Mrs. Marshall was standing in the doorway, having already seen and welcomed Hugh. Flossie quitted her grasp of his hand for one moment, to throw herself into Aunt Elsie's arms. "Oh, isn't it —isn't it joy? O Aunt Elsie, I don't know what to say,—I don't know how to thank God enough for bringing Hugh back," she sobbed in her radiant happiness.

"Tell Him so, darling Flossie,—though He knows it already," whispered Mrs. Marshall. And Flossie's very heart echoed the words. Yes, her dear Master knew all,—knew how she did not deserve this joy, and could never thank Him for it as she ought. And yet He had given it to her. What a loving tender gracious Master the little handmaid had!

CHAPTER XXIV.

LIGHT AND SHADOW.

"AND, Hugh, will you live here now?"

"Live here, Flossie?"

"Yes, in this house, with me and all of them?"

"This house does not belong to me, dearest."

"Oh, but Hugh, you won't go away again, and leave me, will you?"

Flossie looked up in alarm. She was seated, as of old, in the great arm-chair beside her brother, nestling against his arm.

"I must not think of China again, dear one. The climate seemed to act upon me like poison, almost from the first. I should only break down afresh, and have all the expense of the passage for nothing. Besides, I have lost the work that I had out there."

"Don't English people live in China?"

"Many. It was quite a singular thing, the way it affected me."

"I'm glad. I can't help being glad," said Flossie, with a deep sigh. "Is it wrong, Hugh?

Because if it hadn't been for that, you would be out there still, and I shouldn't be sitting by you now this minute."

"But I must give up the hopes of getting plenty of money to make a nice country home again for my Flossie."

"I don't want you to get money. I don't care for a country home or anything, so long as I have you. O Hugh, promise me you won't think about that again, but only let me live with you."

"I shall have to live in London, quite in a little house."

"I don't mind," said Flossie; "I'll do everything for you."

"And, Flossie, I shall be away at work all day, and you would have to go to a day-school, and I can't afford to keep Nurse. It would be a dull life for you. Wouldn't you rather stay on here?"

"Hugh, I wonder you can ask!" said Flossie indignantly.

"I don't think you know what the other sort of life will be till you try it. Colonel Marshall told me he did not think they could part with you."

Flossie's eyes dilated suddenly.

"Hugh, you don't mean—you wouldn't really—you couldn't let me be away from you any more!"

"I don't think I could, unless it were for your good. I wanted just to see what you would say."

"I would live with you in the smallest scrap of a

house that ever was built, and not mind in the least," said Flossie earnestly. "Please, please don't want me to do anything else."

"And you are willing to be my little handmaid again?"

But that name had grown to possess so sweet and sacred a meaning to her, that she had altogether lost sight of the word in this lower sense. She loved Hugh deeply, passionately; but the chief joy of her life was no longer in serving Hugh. It could not be. Flossie did not wish it to be. Hugh saw and wondered somewhat at her sudden gravity.

"Tell me your thoughts, my little woman. You never used to keep them back from me."

"Hugh, I'm His—the Lord Jesus Christ's little handmaid now," said Flossie softly.

"And you think you cannot be mine as well, Flossie?"

He said the words to try her. Flossie's face grew yet more thoughtful.

"I don't know," she said. "Maybe I could, Hugh,—only I want the other to be so much the most. I don't want anything else to make me think less about that."

Hugh bent down, and kissed her silently.

"Do you mind?" she whispered.

"Mind! My darling, it is all joy to me. No, you shall be His little handmaid indeed, and not

mine, sweet one,—all your work done to Him, and not to me,—His smile, and not mine, the reward looked for. Do I mind? Why, this has been my prayer for years, that so it might be with you. We will serve the same Master together, Flossie, learning day by day more of His will, and serving each other for His sake."

"Yes, because I couldn't do less for you now than I used to do," said Flossie. "I think I'll do more, and I am sure I love you more than ever. O Hugh, I'm so glad you understand me."

Flossie felt as if her cup of happiness was quite full that evening. And she could not see that the same Hand, which had given her the cup of rejoicing, was making ready another cup of a different kind, which she was to drink with it.

It was a long sweet talk which the brother and sister had together; long, but it seemed very short to Flossie. She was allowed to come in to late dinner, and to sit by Hugh, and listen to all the conversation. She could not bear yet to lose a single word that he uttered. It seemed so wonderful to hear his voice again after all these months apart. And the separation might have lasted years instead of months. How thankful Flossie felt now for the illness and the long silence, which in the end had brought about this happiness! For if Hugh had been well, and able to write regularly, he need not have come home.

After dinner the whole party gathered together in the drawing-room for a bright evening together. The children were allowed to remain up long past their usual time, even little Gerard included. He had been rather grave and silent since Hugh's return, not saying much, but clinging closely to his mother's side. Some of Hugh's Chinese stories brought a brightening to the sweet patient smile, which had of late become habitual on the little white face. But he did not say much, until Flossie suddenly came across and knelt down by his side. And then there was a look of perfect content.

"Gerard, did you think I was forgetting you?" asked Flossie softly, so that none but Mrs. Marshall could hear.

"No! Flossie, I do love you so."

"You are my other brother, you know; aren't you, Gerard?"

"Don't you think Mamma will be jealous?" asked Mrs. Marshall, smiling, as she looked down at the two children.

"No, you couldn't be, Mamma," said Gerard, "because you know nobody in all the world could be like you. But after you, I *do* love Flossie,—because——"

He did not finish the sentence then. Mrs. Marshall asked playfully, "Why, my pet?" and received no answer. Conversation became general again, and she did not think any more about it; but

Flossie stayed awhile by Gerard, chatting to him in an under-tone. Hugh saw and understood the little piece of thoughtful kindness, and was glad that Flossie did not grow selfish in her joy. And Flossie was thankful—oh, how thankful!—for the same, before many hours were over.

"Come, it is time for you chickens to think of retiring to roost," Colonel Marshall remarked; and just then Nurse appeared with a summons to Gerard. Elsie likewise vanished. Flossie went to Hugh, and stood in her old favourite position, with his arm round her.

"Floss, you are growing taller," he said.

"Am I? Everybody says I am so little."

"You don't imagine, Flossie, I hope, that we are all going to give you up without a struggle," remarked the Colonel. "I believe Hugh has some wild notions about carrying you off, but I have an idea that he will meet with resistance."

"Flossie shall decide," said Hugh, smiling.

"Flossie: not a bit of it. She is under age. And you gave her over to me for an indefinite number of years."

"O Hugh, I'm so glad," sighed Flossie. "Only think if you had stayed all that while."

"You would have had time to forget me."

"Hugh! how can you? But you are only laughing."

"Of course you have formed no plans yet," said

the Colonel. "Six weeks' rest will set you up, and then we must begin to consider."

"I began to consider, as soon as my head would consent to doing anything, Colonel Marshall, and I shall be very much disappointed if I don't find some work in London before ten days are over."

"Work of what sort?"

"A clerkship, if nothing better is to be had."

"And get our little country Flossie into some wretched London lodgings, where she will pine away to a thread-paper, on bad air and poor food."

Hugh looked rather staggered.

"I will do my best for Flossie: but beggars can't be choosers."

"Your pardon, Mr. Silverthorn," said the Colonel in his dry comical way. "My adopted child is not a beggar, neither is her brother. I trust you will not refuse to look upon this house as your head-quarters. As for work, we may do better in some way than you expect. I think I have at least a right to ask, for Flossie's sake, that you should decide upon nothing without consulting me."

Hugh's grateful reply to these words was interrupted. Mrs. Marshall had as usual gone upstairs to Gerard, and now a servant came to the door, with the words—

"Miss Flossie, would you please go to Master Gerard? Missis is there, and she wants you."

"Oh, yes, I'll go," said Flossie half-wonderingly. "I'm coming back, Hugh, so I won't say good-night yet."

She ran upstairs lightly to the tiny chamber where Gerard slept, just adjoining his mother's. Nurse had gone away, and Mrs. Marshall was standing by the bedside, with a closed Bible in her hand. She often read a few verses aloud to him at night, after a fashion never yet dropped from very early childhood. The candle was on a table behind the curtains, and the little white face on the pillow lay in the shade, but Flossie saw the dark eyes looking out for her earnestly.

"Yes, Gerard dear, I'm here. What is it that you want?"

No answer came for a minute, only he held her hand in a tight clasp. Mrs. Marshall fancied suddenly that she could detect something a little unusual in his breathing.

"Does my darling feel quite well to-night?" she asked. "Not quite, Gerard, do you? Is it pain?"

"Mayn't that blind be up, please, Mamma?"

Mrs. Marshall drew it up herself. He had always loved the sight of the sky.

"Sweet Flossie," said the child in a low voice. "Mamma, I love her so—because——"

"Because what, dearest?"

The sentence was finished this time.

"She has told me so much about Jesus. I do love Him so."

"And He loves Gerard——"

"Oh, much the most," broke in Gerard, with a deep sigh. "Flossie——"

"What, darling?"

"I don't know—Flossie—Mamma"— the words came confusedly, and Mrs. Marshall grew uneasy. "He hasn't made me do much, Flossie,—has He?—but then I couldn't."

"And you will be able to do a great deal more up there some day, Gerard, won't you?" whispered Flossie, glancing towards the starry heavens.

Gerard's smile was like a little flash of light. "Yes,—I'll be strong up there. And, Mamma—Flossie—oh, I know what I wanted to say. Flossie, you will be Mamma's own little girl—always—always?"

"Always—after Hugh. And I shall always be your sister, Gerard darling."

He looked wistfully, but said no more. Flossie stood waiting silently for a minute. Was he going to sleep? Should she slip away and return to Hugh? But she delayed, to make quite sure that Gerard had done with her.

Yes, he had done with her now,—for a little while,—had done with them all. He lay quite still, looking up through the window to the shining stars. But all at once Flossie saw Mrs. Marshall

bend over him. And there was a sound, hardly a gasp, hardly a cry, hardly a word. Flossie could not have described it. She only knew it sent blank terror into her heart.

"The bell—Flossie—the bell!"

She flew to obey the agonized command, and then was back again at the bedside. Servants were not slow in answering the summons, but the Messenger who had come for little Gerard was quicker.

His mother had lifted him up in the bed on the first alarm. No time for more. He did not seem to know her now. There was only one quick gasp,—only one sudden smile, as if of joyful response to his Master's call,—and then the little head sank helplessly back.

"Flossie, he is dying. O God, take him gently,—my baby Gerard!"

Before uttered, the prayer was heard. So gently, so calmly, he passed away, that they knew not when he went. And a wondrous heavenly strength seemed given to the poor mother in that moment. For Elsie Marshall, kneeling there beside her lifeless child, did not weep or moan. She had long known the call must some day thus come to her darling. And the bitter suffering which she had dreaded was spared them both. The after-tide of grief would come—must come; but at the first moment it seemed to be almost peace to

think of her little tired one, as at rest for ever in the Arms of Jesus.

For before even a step was heard outside the door, the mother knew that her child had been taken from her. And Flossie's broken sob was the first sound of mourning in the stricken household. And Flossie's trembling hand was the first to give support to the poor mother. And in the sorrowful days following, Flossie was the gentle little comforter of one and all.

"Flossie, it is of no use. We can't spare you."

Thus abruptly did Colonel Marshall break out with something which he had to say. Six weeks had passed away since little Gerard's death, and still Hugh was at the Grove. No one would let him go.

Flossie had come into the library to bring a message to her uncle. He put an arm round her, and held her fast.

"We can't spare you, my little Flossie. It will break Aunt Elsie's heart if you leave her. She always feels as if you were our sweet child's parting gift."

"But Hugh——" said Flossie. "Oh, if we could only all live here together!"

"You don't so much want to live alone with Hugh?"

"I can't bear to leave you all," said Flossie, with filling eyes. "Oh no, I would much rather live here, if Hugh did too."

Colonel Marshall played with the bronze cover of his inkstand for a minute before his next words.

"I want to speak to you soberly and reasonably, Flossie," he said. "For the last month I have been pressing Hugh in vain to consent to something which I wish very much. At last I think he is inclined to give way. You know we are obliged to settle now about his plans."

"Yes, and he wants to take a little wee house in London, and be a clerk, and have me to live there."

"But that is not at all a happy plan, Flossie. He would have hard work, and not much money, and you would be very very lonely."

"He doesn't know what else he can do," said Flossie. "Oh, please don't get him to go out to China again."

"No, indeed! What I want, Flossie, is that *this* should be your home,—yours and Hugh's too."

Flossie opened her eyes. "Oh, that would be lovely! How kind of you, Uncle Norman!"

"You think you would like it?"

"Oh, so much. I do love this house. And then Hugh would be always with me."

"Stop a minute, Flossie. I want you to under-

stand. If you and Hugh make this your home, I shall do for you both as if you were my own son and little daughter. You will go on as you have done this winter. As for Hugh——"

"Yes?" said Flossie questioningly.

"What do you suppose Edric will do by-and-by?"

"You said you meant to send him to school, and then to college," said Flossie.

"Yes, and then he must find his work in life. Young men don't all settle down idly with their fathers and mothers, but they go out into the world. Only, home is always home to them."

Flossie began to understand at last, and she looked exceedingly grave.

"If Hugh were to carry out his plan, he would only be a poor hard-working worn-out clerk all his days. I want him to do better. Hugh is very clever, Flossie. God has given him powers which ought to be used. And if I can put him in the way of rising to perhaps a high position, of being more rich, more able to be useful,—you ought to be glad, not sorry."

"I'm not sorry," said Flossie hurriedly. "Only —please——"

"I want Hugh to study for the law,—to become a lawyer by-and-by. And Hugh would like it very much indeed himself. But, you know, he will have to go away from home to study and

work hard, and only come home here for his holidays."

"Oh, but couldn't I go with him?" said Flossie imploringly.

Not Colonel Marshall but Hugh himself made answer. Flossie was quite startled, for she had not known that he was present. He put his hand on Flossie's shoulder, and said,—

"I must have a word here. Listen to me a moment, darling. There would be great difficulties in the way of your living with me as you propose, —far greater than you can understand. But putting that aside, I want to take the matter on quite another footing. Do you know that if I am to be a lawyer, Flossie, it will cost a great deal of money?"

"Will it?" said Flossie.

"Yes,—and I have almost none."

Flossie looked doubtful. "But then——"

"Yes, you have guessed right," said Hugh, as she glanced at Colonel Marshall. "Such generosity——"

"Stop a moment there," interposed the Colonel drily. "If your brother Hugh had not acted nobly towards me a year back, Floss, I should not be so ready now to adopt him."

"That was nothing. The moment I felt that the place was not justly mine, how in common honour could I have attempted longer to keep it?"

Flossie gazed in some bewilderment from one to the other, not quite knowing what to make of them both.

"But this I must say," added Hugh. "And, Flossie, you must understand me clearly. Colonel Marshall most kindly and generously offers to undertake all these expenses, and to place me in a position, which I had never hoped would be mine again. It is for your advantage as well as mine, darling, or else I might indeed hesitate even longer. And now, all he asks or wishes in return, is that we should allow him to do another kindness, and still afford you a home."

"The kindness there is from Flossie to me," said the Colonel, in a low voice. "My poor wife clings to her more than to any one. Gerard's last words were to Flossie. It was his last wish that she should take his place. If Flossie cannot——"

Colonel Marshall broke off, and Hugh carried it on,—

"If Flossie cannot give herself cheerfully up to this, I utterly decline the offer for myself. Flossie darling, do you understand? One must hang upon the other."

"I do not insist upon that," said Colonel Marshall.

"But I do," said Hugh firmly.

"Then, Flossie, remember that you have to consider your brother's happiness as well as your

own," said Colonel Marshall. "Such a life as he has proposed to himself would be a great trial to him."

"Would it, Hugh?" asked Flossie quietly.

"Not too great a trial, if it came clearly as my duty," said Hugh.

"Which it does not," added the Colonel. "Flossie, you will be no worse off than ninety-nine sisters in a hundred throughout England. All the brothers have to go away, more or less. You must think of the long holidays when you will be together."

Flossie was looking very thoughtful. She did not shed any tears as they expected. And they could not see how hard the battle was below, or how great was the help given. All three were silent for a little while. Flossie was very glad of the quiet. But presently she lifted her head, and said,—

"Hugh, I will do what you think right."

"Dear child, for your sake I cannot but rejoice in the plan."

"And you are sorry not to have me always," said Flossie, with a quiver of her lip.

"Sorry, yet I hardly know how to be, for it is so much better in every way for you. And you may be glad for me."

"Then you'll like it?"

"It only seems almost too good to be true.

But I could not consent, if you were not able to agree happily to it, darling. My little Floss must not be an unwilling burden upon friends."

"Flossie is no sort of burden at all," said the Colonel, taking her into his arms. "My little girl, I think God sent you to be a blessing, and I thank Him that He gives you to us still."

So that was how the matter came about. It was a rejoicing household that evening, despite recent sorrow. Flossie would have been sorely missed by one and all, and she too could not but feel how she would have grieved to go away.

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And still would little Flossie Silverthorn have her Master's work to do. Still would she need to wait daily upon Him, watching for His commands.

But the other little servant had gone early to his rest. It was not much that he could undertake, but he could manage just as much as his Master gave him to do. More was not needed. He was only told, perhaps, to stand still, and hold a heavy taper, and let its light shine round. And he had bravely, smiling in his weariness. But the gentle Master soon saw how the feeble strength was taxed by even that small load; so pityingly He took away the taper, and called His little servant Home.